

# ON THE ROLE OF DEATH

**Swami Paratparananda**

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A CHILD comes into this world disbursing, as it were, joy unto all its near and dear ones. Yes, even, the mother who suffers extreme pain to bring it into being is pleased and forgets all her pains looking at it. But the child itself is born with a cry in its mouth. The child grows into an adolescent and becomes a man, performs deeds well or ill and grows old and lastly bids farewell to this world willy nilly, immersing his kith and kin in sorrow. That is the existence of man. But how does man take his exit? We shall try to recapture that here. Most people do so unwillingly, struggling to escape but unable to get out of the clutches of death. With their minds hovering about the hoard of wealth they have acquired, about the dear children that surround them and last, but not least, about their own bodies, which though corruptible were so well taken care of, though worn out so much more liked. It is a wrench, at the heart to leave the body, unbearable at the same time unavoidable. That is the way most of the people take leave of the world — with moans and groans. The pangs of death are terrible.

Let us not believe, for a moment, if anyone says that all of them who bid adieu in this manner are agnostics, atheists or sceptics even the so-called believers too fare no better. For they had not practised what they uttered their lips spoke but their hearts responded not. They had no faith in their own beliefs, no trust in the God they professed. So they too quit the world in a like manner. Death is an inevitable process <sup>1</sup> of this creation. That is the one thing that is certain in this universe; forests are turned into cities and cities turn into desert dunes; where mountains are, there may form lakes in time. So uncertainty there is about everything, but death is very certain for every being that is born.<sup>2</sup> All else is momentary. You had your forefathers and they again their own but where are they all now! Gone, gone are they into the womb of death.

Let not the sophisticated think that a pessimistic view of life is being presented here. There is no idea in this to weaken man. This is the most realistic view of all the realisms. Why should we be unrealists and blind our eyes to this indubitable fact? For does not death consume everything? It does. Let this be not forgotten. The role of death is therefore to make man aware of his destiny: that however high he may be placed, whatever aid of technology or medicine he may have, his end is either in a coffin or in a handful of ashes. Shall we then mourn our life in sack cloth and ashes? No, that is not the purpose of life, nor of death. This process of

birth and death is going to be repeated until we know God, see God, realize Him in this very life. A pointed reference is found to this idea in one of the Upanisads which comments: 'If you *know* It here you have the truth, you have all. If not it is a great loss — a denouement. Knowing It (Brahman) present in every being the wise ones leaving this mortal coil attain Immortality.'<sup>3</sup>

The passage quoted above implies four things clearly: (1) that there is a life after death, (2) that there is a way of living by which man's life can be fruitful here and a blessing hereafter, (3) that all life lived otherwise than in this manner is a colossal waste, and (4) that the way to Immortality lies in seeing divinity manifest in every being.

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If death stalks the world and we brood over it, how can we take courage to live a life, glorious or not? This question also has been answered in the above passage. Let us see how. We come across here two words *mrtyu* (death) and *amrta* (immortal). After death one becomes immortal. Is it not a contradiction? Apparently it is. But what is it that dies? Can we say it is the body? No. The body is there though the spirit had sped away. What kept the body moving? The spirit. So death is a separation of this material body from something which we as ordinary men are usually ignorant of, but which those who have felt and experienced It call, Spirit, the Ātman, Jiva or Self. And this Ātman they say becomes immortal. What is the meaning of that? Was it mortal then? No, but in common parlance we can no more describe it than in this way. For man sees the body and thinks that he is that much mass of flesh and bones. Very few can transcend that idea. It is impossible for many even to think that there can be any existence beyond the body. The very idea puts them in a terrible fright. To such it is said that this Atman becomes immortal. So, knowing that all does not end with the here, man must take courage to work for the hereafter, immortality.

In olden days this phenomenon of death must have set man thinking as to 'what happens after it', as we notice in the story of Naciketas in the *Kathopanishad*. It is even today a riddle to a great part of humanity. Man dare not peep beyond the world of the senses. For it is dark to him there. He has neither the equipment nor the instruments to probe into its depth. He cannot know anything.

What is beyond is a mystery that death holds in its own possession. Those who are able to force this secret from it will go laughing; they will accept physical dissolution with as much equanimity as they accepted life. Because they have unmasked death. It is the mask that is frightening man. Children are afraid when someone frightens them putting on uncanny masks like that of giants. But a few clever among them will find out that it is the mother that has come to frighten them and being sure of

it go and jump into her lap smiling. Likewise, when once man knows the true nature of death and seen the face of Reality unmasked he does not fear any more. For he finds that the real in himself and the Reality behind the universe are identical or he sees it is the beloved Mother that exists beyond his ken of the senses. He then understands that leaving the world he would not lose anything but gain the eternal company of the Divine Mother or the Lord. Hence how can death have any fear for him? There are instances when people have bidden farewell to this world at the vision of their Chosen Deity, saying 'Coming, Mother, coming ', probably, in response to the beckoning of the Mother. It should not, however, be mistaken as the delirium of a fevered brain, for they were seen to be in full possession of their faculties as they were passing away. After uttering these words, with a smile on their lips they depart and that without any effort, without any regret. Sri Krishna says in the *Gita*, 'One who at the end of one's life goes away leaving one's body remembering Me alone that one undoubtedly attains My true nature.'<sup>4</sup>

There is not a single passage anywhere in the Hindu scriptures which speaks or indicates of death as something to be dreaded. Here, in the sloka of the *Gita* quoted above, for instance we have the words, *kalevaram muktvā*, casting off the body and *prayāti*, goes. These expressions point out that there is no extinction of the individual (the Ātman) with his separation from the body. That is the idea that is taught — of travel — a beautiful idea, pregnant with meaning. Who does not know about travelling in these days? Every one travels according to his means and according to his likings. One goes to a holy place, another for sight-seeing, a third one on business, a fourth one is dragged by the bond of slavery from one end of the world to the other and so on. Similarly man according to his desires, according to his likings and inclinations and with the store of merit or demerit at his back travels i.e. transmigrates from one body to another, from one place of enjoyment to another or straightaway back to the Lord, from whom he came, to live in communion with Him. When death is viewed in this light, has man fear of it? It is no doubt good and grand to scorn life and face death laughing in a good cause, to become a martyr. But it is grander and better still to pass away knowing the Reality — a state which knocks off the wheel of birth and death for ever for that person.

How does the realization of God or Reality rescue man from the fear of death? As already stated this phenomenon of death unites the devotee with his Chosen Ideal, the beloved Lord, 'for fear of whom the fire burns and the sun shines and gives heat; for fear of whom again, Indra, Vayu and even Death, the fifth one, run their errands dutifully'.<sup>5</sup> When it is the Lord who directs Death why would the devotee be afraid of it? For when death comes it will be by the will of God. Viewed from the Advaitic standpoint also it is almost the same, for 'after realizing the oneness of everything where can there be infatuation or sorrow'.<sup>6</sup> In this state there is no more going or coming. Sri Ramakrishna discussed this point in a

very penetrative manner. He puts the questions: What are man's duties? What will accompany him after death, in the hereafter? He himself then answers thus:

“True. When a man dies after attaining Knowledge, he doesn't have to go to another plane of existence; he isn't born again. But as long as he has not attained Knowledge, as long as he has not realized God, he must come back to the life of this earth; he can never escape it. For such a person there is a hereafter. A man is liberated after attaining Knowledge, after realizing God. For him there is no further coming back to earth. If a boiled paddy-grain is sown, it doesn't sprout. Just so, if a man is boiled by the fire of Knowledge, he cannot lead a worldly life, for he has no attachment to ‘woman and gold’. What will you gain by sowing boiled paddy? . . . . He who has realized God has obtained the fruit of Immortality — not a common fruit like a gourd or a pumpkin. He is free from rebirth. He is not born anywhere — on earth, in the solar world, or in the lunar world.” <sup>7</sup>

This statement of Sri Ramakrishna is amply supported by Sruti and Smṛti. Yājñavalkya was asked by Ārthabhāga: ‘When this liberated man dies, do his organs go up from him or do they not?’ Yājñavalkya replied, ‘No they merge in him only. The body swells, is inflated and in that state lies dead.’<sup>8</sup>

In the prior discussion Yājñavalkya by implication had established that death is swallowed by another death — the death of realization; and he gave the example of fire and water. As fire consumes everything and even this fire becomes the food of water, so death itself becomes the food of self-realization. The *Gīta* too says: ‘Here itself is the transmigration overcome by those whose mind is established in equality; for Brahman is even and blemishless; hence they are established in Brahman,’<sup>9</sup>

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When we say that the Hindu scriptures do not describe death as something to be dreaded, can we suppose that they encourage death by suicide? There is no basis for such a supposition. Suicide is committed mostly by frustrated persons, cowards who dare not face calamities or people who lose their mental balance at least for the moment. But there may have been a few cases where some realized souls ended their physical existence forcibly; but such instances are very rare and they cannot be termed as suicide. Sri Ramakrishna is of this view.

It is here necessary to point out that merely imagining that one has realized God, or because one had some dreams or passing visions regarding God one is not entitled to end his life on this earth. The marks of God-realization are too clear to go unnoticed. To realize God one must be free of desires as in the analogy of the ship of Sri Ramakrishna — ‘all

the bolts and screws of a ship that is passing a magnetic mine are loosened and the ship founders'. Similarly, when once a person realizes the Highest his desires are completely destroyed; worldly or heavenly enjoyments do not attract him: all his doubts and vacillations come to an end; the fruits of all his actions good or bad are annihilated.<sup>10</sup> Here is a test of man's disinterestedness. Generally people crave for the fruits of their actions which are good. If a man can sincerely give up his desire to enjoy the fruits of his meritorious acts — even the desire to gain name and fame — then he has reached perfection, in other words, only a man who has realized God, who is feeling God in every breath that he takes, can alone be so detached. Such a person may cast the body away if he finds the pull of God too intense to be suffered in it, or retain it as long as his *prārabdha karma* lasts.

#### IV

Death is an accoutrement in the armoury of Nature to forewarn man not to entangle himself too much in the affairs of the world. If we consider its role in the most materialistic way, death is a great reliever of distress and disease. Ailments assail man no matter what his age is, according to the merits of his actions done in the past or present life; with age the power of resistance drops and diseases assume frightening magnitude. Yet, the man given to an outward life finds not his desires lessening. Sri Sankara in a graphic description in his poem *Mohamudgara* brings this out: 'With furrowed skin, freckled face, toothless mouth, the old man totters on his stick, yet the bootless mass of desires has left him not.'<sup>11</sup> Such is the fate of the man who ensnares himself in the world that he has built around himself. Sri Ramakrishna cites the example of the silk worm which builds a cocoon round itself and suffers to die in it. Should it however care to, it can break and come out of it to fly free in its beautiful plumage. But such is its infatuation for the house that it has built that it prefers to remain and consequently die there! Man is none better. He is satisfied in indulging with petty jealousies, with his guilted acquirements, and with his wife and children, whom he considers his most near and dear ones. But what happens when he dies. Sankara pathetically depicts it thus: 'As long as the breath resides in the body so long do they enquire about the man's welfare, but when that last breath has left the body, the very wife is afraid of that frame.'<sup>12</sup>

However, such is *maya* that man is befooled to believe that all is well with him. Sri Ramakrishna remarks that even the Lord entangled in *maya* does not like to get out of it. He gives the instance of the mythical Incarnation of Lord Vishnu as the sow. For a long time after the purport, for which He assumed that body, was accomplished the Lord did not return to His abode. The gods were perturbed, messengers were sent but the Lord did not heed them. At last the devas with Siva in their forefront went to Him and found Him suckling the young ones. When He was told

that He should return to His abode, He replied that He was happy there and didn't want to leave the young ones. At this, the story goes on that, Siva drove his trident and demolished the sow body of the Lord and the Lord too with a great laugh returned to His abode. The story may be mythical but it has a great lesson. Man's condition is almost identical. Man too, forgetting his own nature, wallows here in this world, weeps and wails and sometimes smiles to weep again. But when he knows what his true nature is, he renounces all transient things and seeks the Eternal. And till he achieves the Eternal, till he ceases to see, as it were, many things here, he will have to face death again and again, says the *Kathopanisad*.<sup>13</sup> In this respect too the role of death is very conspicuous. If one death itself is unbearable should not man try to overcome these rounds of births and deaths?

What is the way? For the ordinary individual the path of righteousness, *dharma* has been enjoined by the scriptures. When it has been rightly practised man becomes fit to proceed higher. Without a moral base, there can be no spiritual edifice, small or great. 'One who has not rested from wickedness, one who has not gained equanimity, one who has not controlled his senses, and one who has a fickle mind cannot aspire to attain this knowledge (of the Ātman).'<sup>14</sup> That is the verdict of the sages of all times and climes and one who wants to go across this ocean of birth and death has to practise equanimity, morality, chastity and control of the senses. There is no other way. 'Neither by karma nor by progeny or wealth but by renunciation (of all the desires) alone some attained immortality, (went beyond the bounds of death),'<sup>15</sup> declares the Upanisad categorically.

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<sup>1</sup> Gita, II.27.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Kena Up. II.5.

<sup>4</sup> Gita 8.5.

<sup>5</sup> Katha Up. 6.3.

<sup>6</sup> Isa Up. 7.

<sup>7</sup> The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, 1947, p.640. Published by Sri Ramakrishna Math, Madras-4.

<sup>8</sup> Br.Up. 3.2.11. Translation by Swami Madhavananda.

<sup>9</sup> Bhagavad Gita 5.19.

<sup>10</sup> Munda Up. 2.2.8.

<sup>11</sup> Mohamudgara – 15.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>13</sup> Katha Up. 4.10.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 2.24.

<sup>15</sup> Kaivalyopanisad. 1.3.