

**WHAT IS
DEATH?**

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"WHAT you are now passing through I myself felt and knew, as you will remember. And 'passing through' is the correct term, believe me, though just now the shock and exhaustion of grief make movement of any kind seem impossible indeed.

"It is often only when life appears to hold nothing that we can examine it, unprejudiced. What has happened makes a stoppage for you. The past is past and done with. The present is merely deadness. Toward the future you have not the heart to look. So you now face life in your moment of stillness — life naked and uncolored, because you have no feeling whatever for it; yet life may be ready to give up its secrets to you.

"In spite of the fact that you have suffered and grown hopeless because of your recent loss, a new cycle of growth and understanding can be before you. Yours is the common lot. All die, but some learn from their own deep experience of grief and loss how to alleviate the sorrow of others. First, then, to understand. I found much of help in Theosophical books, and in studying with others. I found that pain is a teacher and, finally, that Death was a friend to me as to the one who had gone.

"What was it that you loved of this Being who has passed-the body? Or was it the Life, the Consciousness, the Soul that used it? You know you loved that Individual *through* all its changes of body, of which there were so many. This in itself is proof that it was not the body but something else you loved. And is that Soul *which* you loved now dead? How can you say so — you who persist *through* every change of form! That *which* lives and thinks in you is the 'Eternal Pilgrim, for whom there is no beginning and no end, however many changes of body and of mind you use. So it was and is with the Being you have 'lost'

"Nothing is ever lost. This 'losing' of yours, is nothing further than the loss of physical contact for a little while. You met here on earth in bodies during this physical life. You will meet here again in your next physical life. The Universe is a Universe of Law. Effects inevitably follow causes. Think of the causes you two have set up together during the time of your relationship! You will meet the effects together in another life right here on earth, the place where your joint thoughts and actions took place, the field where you sowed your seeds. Your 'loss' then is really not a loss, but merely a separation for a time."

From a Lerrer

Two things happen in the minds of most men and women who lose a close friend through death. First, whether or not a person believes in heaven or hell, or has been told that death is the end of all thought and feeling for the one who has gone, he finds himself *re-asking* the question, "Where are the dead?" in such a way as to show he had not been really impressed by either of the two usual answers. Second, he sees clearly how the greatest sadness of death comes from realizing that something of importance was left uncompleted between himself and the one now separated from him; he desires to believe that there may be some way in which his knowing or loving the other person may continue toward a better adjustment or fulfilment.

It is because these two things happen in the mind of man when he is faced with the death of a friend that the theosophical viewpoint becomes a natural thing to consider seriously. For Theosophy holds that there is a continual evolution for every human soul, that there is no final heaven or hell, and that all who die return again to earth where they may, according to natural law, recover lost friends and proceed to develop further, as well as to deepen the bonds of understanding only temporarily cut off by the dissolution of the physical body.

The theosophist feels that it is both sad and unnecessary for the natural questions about death to be left without any hope of a reasonable answer. Many who talk of science as the only sort of real knowledge say that there is no scientific basis for hope that man may live another life on earth. But the "science" we know today, according to the greatest scientists themselves, covers only a very small part of the things which need to be understood. All that a scientist can say is that he has as yet found no way to prove that the soul lives when the body dies. The man of religion who says, "There is only one true teaching of what happens to the soul after death, and man cannot live again on earth," may be mistaken, for he also offers no evidence against the soul's rebirth.

If men were only their bodies, they could not ever feel, as they do, that, even though loved ones have gone from their bodies, *they must still exist*. It is as much a part of man to feel that the "dead" are not completely "gone" as is the instinct of love or the desire to understand. In all the religions of the world, this one natural belief occurs in some form — the belief that there is much more to man than the body that we see, and that the inner person is so much more important than the body that he must continue to live somewhere after the body dies. From this point on, the theosophist—that is, one who is convinced that there can be a real science of the inner man, possible for anyone to know — feels that merely to accept or try to believe any theological notion promising a future life in heaven will help but little. In the first place, no one can learn anything either in heaven or hell, as these "places" are commonly described, and if we think those whom we have loved must always go to a place where they can no longer expand and grow, the story is just as sad and hopeless as it would be if we said that nothing lives after the body dies.

The theosophical view is really older than any religion, because it is natural to man. It was held as the truest thought by the Hindus and Egyptians and Greeks — to name but a few in ancient times—that death is simply a longer sleep than that we experience every night of our lives, after which the soul wakes again in a new body. All through the centuries this idea has been expressed by poets and philosophers. Theosophical writers have called this idea of rebirth "reincarnation," signifying that the soul, or real man, incarnates again in flesh when the suitable conditions for a further working out of its destiny are provided by a new body. Theosophists say, then, in answer to the question, "Where are the dead?" that we might consider, *there can be no such thing as someone "dead."* The man who loses his body is, simply, according to this view, resting — and, perhaps, dreaming.

The oldest and most complete theories on "after-death states" are those once held in India, in the days of a wise and great civilization; they are now set forth in Theosophy. The general ideas which these old beliefs represent seem to have been natural to many other peoples who were, philosophers instead of believers in a Personal God. This is probably because they are extensions of what man can learn about his own mental states during life. The old Hindu ideas of "Devachan" — the "land of the Gods" — meant a state in which for a time between births each man exists in god-like fashion within his surviving mind. On the other hand, "Kama-loka" — "place-of-Desire" — represents a condition of confusion just following the death of the body, when the soul is separating itself from all the irrational passions and desires active during the life last lived; that is, wrestling psychologically with various impediments of the passional nature, finally casting them aside, and then passing beyond the reach of emotional stress into a dream-like world where the hopes and aspirations unrealized in life are worked out to a kind of fulfillment. This period of Kama-loka, like the happier sort of dream-state which follows, was held to be long or short *entirely according to the nature of a person's thoughts and emotions during life.*

Anyone who has been severely ill or confined to bed for a long time is in a good position to understand this idea, for he will probably think of this period as a sort of "nightmare." Regrets and disappointments and burning personal ambitions to accomplish things which his condition makes impossible of fulfillment, at first, tend to engage all his thoughts; later, a calmness of more constructive thinking may follow. Men in great suffering are very apt to look first at the very worst of themselves and their lives, and afterward, toward the very best. And such-as the Hindus, Egyptians, and some of the Greeks taught-is the case after the death of the body. The soul, alone with its memories, struggles first to free itself from those most disturbing. This would suggest what the origin of the Catholic doctrine of Purgatory may have been. After such a period, the "Devachan" of the Oriental philosophy becomes more understandable, since all men live with many worth-while and creative desires which they are not able to bring to completion. *Yet these are a very real part of the man*, and demand a mental assimilation when their practical accomplishment on earth is denied.

The notions about heaven and hell, with which the people of "Christian" nations are more or less familiar, are probably the crude remains of earlier and more philosophical ideas. If we consider hell and heaven to be *states of mind* instead of places, it is easy to see the reason for such ideas. For each man, in the course of his normal living, enters periodically into states of great happiness and great unhappiness, and furthermore, *while he is in them*, he is apt to forget everything else. The mind, in other words, builds its own world. Is it so strange, then, to imagine that after the death of the body this same process may continue, in an even more intense degree, since no physical interruptions are possible?

Those who have "died" may logically be thought of as still existing, in one of these two states. Each state will last just as long as the nature of the person demands. Those who tired easily from psychological strain during life might require a long period of mental readjustment, while those who seemed to have the energy at all times to enter vigorously into even the most difficult experiences might be ready to be born again on earth in a much shorter time. The great philosopher Plato wrote an allegory in the last book of his *Republic* about souls making themselves ready to come back to earth again. Each one, he said, had a choice as to when and where to be born, but that choice must always be in accord with the soul's capacities and needs. So it is really a matter of being drawn naturally to the environment best suited to the soul, as provided by parents, family, and nation.

It would, however, be a mistake to think that one who held reincarnation to be true would therefore judge men by their environments — a pleasant environment meaning that they were "good souls," and an unpleasant one meaning that they were "bad souls." The greatest of men often take upon themselves the most difficult and apparently unrewarding tasks for reasons which they themselves must understand much more clearly than can those around them. So it might be for souls who are resting between births: some souls might be drawn to a very difficult family situation and take up such a burden, knowingly.

If there is a soul in man, assuredly it does not think in terms of physical wealth or personal ambition, nor care about what the short-sighted part of man's nature calls success or failure.

Some people have felt that they could not consider seriously the possibility of reincarnation because they do not remember their past lives. Yet what of the victims of amnesia, who carry with them the results of many things done by them in a past which they cannot remember? If men are reborn, it would, as a matter of fact, be impossible

to expect an entirely new body to retain and give expression to the details recorded by a different physical brain hundreds of years ago. The idea suggested by reincarnation is that the soul, not the brain, continues to live. And what is a "soul"? If the word has any meaning at all, it must stand for those unique qualities of character which distinguish us, far more than any physical differences, from our fellow human beings. And our most important qualities *do not depend upon the memory of the brain*. Our most important qualities are our attitudes of mind, formed through experience provided by brain, yet retained as moral instincts rather than as specific memories.

A man's particular set of memories may be almost indistinguishable from those of others, yet his basic attitude toward life, and the use which he makes of the same experiences, differ greatly. Each person *is* a distinct individual, even in the case of identical twins. This simple fact, so clear in all human experience that it is folly to deny it, will also explain why we are often so certain that the one who dies is not dead — why should the most important thing about a person—his individuality — be assumed to be lost?

And if the essential character of a person is not thought to be lost — if *some* kind of immortality seems sure — what kind of life after death may our reason accept? Strong arguments for the logic of reincarnation are furnished by observed laws of nature. Everything in the natural world develops through those rhythms of recurrence which we call the cycles of the seasons; each new year brings a new phase of life and growth to the plant or tree. Every year is "the same," in that it is but a repetition of certain opportunities for growth which existed before, yet no plant or tree is the same in stature as it was before the season began. The appearance of death which comes with the winter does not keep the hidden life within the tree from reaching the next spring.

So it also appears to be with the mental growth of man. From day to day he is brought back to the same general conditions of life, yet he may grow in inner stature with each new repetition of opportunity. All learning is cyclical. Often we fail to grasp the full significance of an experience until we have passed through it many times. The Eastern doctrines of Karma and Reincarnation answer to a common human feeling — that what we fail to learn in the first attempt may somewhere and sometime be grasped more firmly by the mind and correctly understood. This thought of many lives or cycles of growth for each man gives the widest horizon to human potentialities, and because of this very fact is the most natural to imagine.

Those who hold the idea of reincarnation in their minds see that it brings them calm, and that the idea is sensible. Death is neither to be feared nor envied. The "dead" are neither greater nor less than those of us who are now alive. The dead will live again and we shall die again — always the same real persons which we make ourselves, yet always expressing different parts of our natures in different states and conditions of consciousness. It is moreover possible to think that we may be re-united with those we have loved, when there is a strong enough reason for this occurring; and that we may be born in the sort of environment which will help us to find each other again in another life. In the meantime, it may be that occasionally we shall experience a different form of "contact" with one who has "died." If our own thoughts and feelings are able to reach to the same state in which the other mind exists, there may be a strong feeling of communion, translated by us into an extremely happy and vivid dream.

All claims made by mediums and séance-sitters that they can "make contact" are somehow unconvincing, since none of these purported communications ever seems to give the feeling of the living presence of the one who has died, as do vivid dreams. The medium may stumble upon the atmosphere of confused impressions left by the soul in its

early after-death struggle to reach beyond the "drag" of the physical world, but no spiritualistic communication is, or ever has been, inspiring or creative. Whatever the medium contacts, it is not the man or woman or child we knew or cared about, any more than is the body which has been buried or cremated.

The real contact between any two friends, living or "dead," is the contact of mutual understanding and love, and the inspiration of worth-while things undertaken in common. Why is it not possible for such relationships to pass untroubled through death, and back to life again? Such is, perhaps, the wisest teaching of all the ages, because it is at once the most natural and the most hopeful.

The following lines, written by the Teacher of Theosophy of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, pass on the inspiration of a wider and more intimate view of death than any mere words of solace can afford. It is the view which, although here taken from the pages of *The Key to Theosophy*, has been taught in part or whole by countless sages, seers and spiritual reformers, and which any man can make his own:

"There is hardly a human being whose Ego does not hold free intercourse, during the sleep of his body, with those whom it loved and lost, yet, on account of the positiveness and non-receptivity of its physical envelope and brain, no recollection, or a very dim, dream-like remembrance, lingers in the memory of the person once awake. ... We are with those whom we have lost in material form, and far, far nearer to them now, than when they were alive. And it is not only in the fancy of the *Devachanee*, as some may imagine, but in reality. For pure divine love is not merely the blossom of a human heart, but has its roots in eternity. Spiritual holy love is immortal, and Karma brings sooner or later all those who loved each other with such a spiritual affection to incarnate once more in the same family group. Again we say that love beyond the grave, illusion though you may call it, has a magic and divine potency which reacts on the living. A mother's *Ego* filled with love for the imaginary children it sees near itself, living a life of happiness, as real to it as when on earth—that love will always be felt by the children in flesh. It will manifest in their dreams, and often in various events—in providential protections and escapes, for love is a strong shield, and is not limited by space or time."

—H.P. Blavatsky

**United Lodge of Theosophists
347 E 72nd Street, New York, NY 10021**

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