

Death – What To Do About It?

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Preface

I have been to several funerals. I have seen people wailing uncontrollably and then after a few weeks, carrying on with their own life. I have seen some mothers totally broken down and carry the pain every moment of the rest of their life. I have even seen one mother who did not recover into a normal life for the rest of her life. I have always felt that if only people understand death well, they will be able to handle both life and death with the right attitude. I have been very fortunate to have very good guidance in my life on philosophy and living. I feel it is my duty to share what I have learnt with people in need. Hence, I put together this short booklet. The references in brackets are to Srimad Bhagavad Gita.

What happens to the person who dies?

Story of King Chitraketu

Here is the story of King Chitraketu from Srimad Bhagavatam. The land of Soorasena (near Mathura) was ruled by King Chitraketu. He had several queens, but no children. One day Rishi Angiras happened to arrive at the king's palace. The king told the sage, "Oh great Rishi, by the Lord's grace and by your blessings, my kingdom is prosperous and peaceful. People are all happy. But I have a great sorrow in my life. I do not have a child. Please bless me with a child." Under the direction of the sage, the king performed a puja and the sage asked the king to give the sacrificial remnant to his senior-most queen – Kritadyuti. The sage blessed the king, "Oh king, your queen will bear you a son who will bring you both joy and sorrow."

When the son was born, the king and the queen were very happy. The king did a lot of rituals and gave away a lot of wealth desiring the longevity of his son. Day by day, his attachment to his son grew. The mother Kritadyuti also got very attached to her son. However, the grief of her co-wives, who were childless, grew in equal proportion. Now the king no longer had the same love towards the other queens as he had before. These queens suffered intensely due to the combined effect of their envy towards Kritadyuti, inferiority complex due to childlessness and the king's neglect of them.

Overwhelmed by grief and envy, the queens secretly poisoned the infant. When Kritadyuti found her son dead, she fell unconscious with a great cry. The maids in the palace started to cry aloud. The queens also joined and acted as if crying. The king broke down in a flood of tears. They were both lamenting unstoppably for a long time.

Taking pity on them, Rishi Angiras and Rishi Narada appeared. They told the king, "Oh king, birth is always followed by death in the cycle of creation. The duration of each life is decided by the karma for which that birth was given." The king understood the nature of creation and thanked the sage Angiras. The sage said, "I had come earlier to impart knowledge to you. But you were longing for a child. So I decided that you need more maturity. Now that you have understood the fleeting nature of the world, you should seek the knowledge that will free you from all sorrow forever." Saying this, the sage taught the king the knowledge of the Self as pure Consciousness.

Sage Narada, using his Yogic powers, showed the subtle body of the dead child to the sorrowing relatives. The sage said, “O jiva, don’t you see that your father, mother and relatives are sorrowing for you? Assume your previous body, succeed the throne and enjoy the rest of your life surrounded by wealth and loving relatives.” The jiva said, “Which body are you talking about? Who are these parents? I have been going from birth to birth in a cycle among Devas, animals and humans according to my karma. In which birth of mine have these been my father and mother? In the succession of births, anyone might be anyone’s friend, relative, neighbour or stranger. Just as objects of sale like gold or land pass from one hand to another, the jiva passes from one womb to another. All relationships are temporary only. Even in the embodied state, the jiva is eternal and not attached to the body. He has continuous existence even after death, but has no continuous identification with the previous embodiments or the associations in them. Only as long as the jiva is embodied, the relationship pertaining to that body subsists. In reality, the jiva is free from all associations.” Saying so, the dead child departed. All the relatives became free from grief. The queens who poisoned the child became ashamed of their action. They abandoned all envy and performed expiatory rites on the bank of river Yamuna.

Who is the jiva?

We all have freewill. The jiva is the entity that holds the freewill. We are free to decide our actions and attitudes. We are also responsible for our actions. The jiva is the one which wields the freewill and experiences the consequences of the actions. The body, mind and intellect are instruments of the jiva to express and experience in the world (15-9).

What happens to the jiva after death?

Every birth has to culminate in death (2-27). Just as a person removes old clothes and wears fresh ones every day, the jiva changes the body when the karma for which the body was given is exhausted (2-22). Death is a part of the natural cycle of the jiva, which includes birth, growth and old age (2-13). Death is followed by another birth (2-27). After the death of the body, the jiva goes to heaven to enjoy the punya gathered through good actions. When the punya is exhausted, the jiva comes back to the earth (9-21). On the earth, the jiva takes birth based on the karma of past lives. If the jiva had lived a very noble life, it takes birth in a devoted family of spiritual seekers (6-42). The next level is a family with a lot of culture and prosperity (6-41). The jiva itself has no birth or death (2-20). It just takes the memories, tendencies and karma from one body to another, just like the breeze takes smell from one place to another (15-8).

What powers the jiva?

The Lord resides in the heart of the jiva as the Conscious principle, which powers the jiva (18-61, 13-2, 10-20, 15-15). He is like the electricity, which powers various appliances like light, fan, refrigerator, heater, television, etc. Though the electricity is the same, it drives various appliances based on the individuality of the appliance. One appliance creates warmth, while another creates coolness. One appliance creates light, while another creates wind. The difference is because of the peculiarity of the appliance, though powered by the same electricity and connected to the same circuit. This can be compared to the thread that runs through all the beads of different colors in a chain (7-7).

What is the goal of this cycle of births?

The goal of this repeated cycle of births is to realize our true nature as Consciousness, different from the body and mind.

All life forms strive for security, happiness and peace. But they seek these in the world of people, objects and situations. Being of ever changing nature, the world cannot give lasting security, happiness and peace (9-33). Thus, the search is never ending. The desires, like the all-consuming fire, will never get fulfilled (3-39). The unfulfilled desires drive the jiva towards another birth in search of security, happiness and peace (9-3).

This cycle will come to an end only when the jiva realizes that real unconditional and permanent security, happiness and peace does not come from people, objects and situations. It is the very innermost nature of the jiva. The jiva as pure Consciousness is of the very nature of security, happiness and peace. This knowledge puts an end to these desires and this search.

Endowed with knowledge and fulfillment, full of joy and peace, the jiva spends the rest the life in that body actively serving others as temples of the same Consciousness. Dying with this knowledge and fulfillment, the jiva is freed from the cycle (2-72).

This knowledge is the goal of this cycle of births.

How can we help a person who is dead?

Our love to a person who has died can be expressed as gratitude, blessings and prayer for them.

We can remember the good qualities of the person, the good things done by the person and feel grateful to the person. We should bless the person and pray for the person thus, “Wherever you are, whichever birth you will be taking, may you be happy. May God bless you with a good birth in a noble and devoted family. May God bless you with a lot of opportunity for serving holy people. May God bless you with the urge to strive for your spiritual development and for the welfare of the world.”

The close relatives should pray for the departed people during new moon days and the lunar day of their death. We should pray for them at holy places that are meant for this purpose like Rameshwaram, Gaya and Badrinath.

How can we help a person who is about to die?

Story of transformation from life to life

Once Rishi Narada asked Lord Shiva, “Oh Lord, everyone knows that you are always chanting the name of Rama in your mind. What is so great about the Rama mantra? Can you please enlighten me?”

Shiva showed Narada a worm living in a lump of cow dung and said, “Narada please go to the worm and chant the mantra ‘Om Shri Ram Jaya Ram Jaya Jaya Ram’ to it and tell me what happened.” Narada went

to the worm and did so. Immediately the worm died. Narada became sad. He came back to Shiva and told, “Oh Lord, I must have chanted wrongly. The worm died immediately on hearing the chanting.” Shiva replied, “Narada, nothing was wrong in your chanting.”

Shiva showed Narada a newly born puppy and said, “Narada, can you see that lovely puppy that was born just a few moments ago? Go and chant the mantra ‘Om Shri Ram Jaya Ram Jaya Jaya Ram’ into the ears of the puppy.” Narada went to the puppy and chanted. Immediately the puppy also died. Narada came back to Shiva with a lot of sorrow. Narada told Shiva, “Oh Lord, I do not understand. The puppy also died. What should I do?”

Shiva showed Narada a newly born calf of a cow and said, “Narada, go and chant into the ears of the calf.” Narada went hesitatingly to the calf and chanted ‘Om Shri Ram Jaya Ram Jaya Jaya Ram’ into the ears of the calf that was born just a few moments back. As expected by Narada, the calf also died. Narada came back to Shiva and complained, “Oh Lord, you have made me the messenger of death. Why are you asking me to do this? Why is the mantra, which is supposed to be a saving mantra, killing every jiva that hears it? I am confused. Please tell me.”

Shiva replied, “Narada, do it just one more time. There is a noble king to whom a son is born a few moments ago. Go and chant the mantra into the ears of the little prince.” Narada was shocked. He replied, “Oh Lord. No, please do not make me the messenger of death again. My heart is already tormented by being the cause of death of three lives.” Shiva smiled and said, “Narada, do not worry. It will not happen this time. The baby will tell you the greatness of the mantra.”

With great hesitation, Narada went to the palace. The palace was fully decorated with flowers and arches. There were lamps lit all over the palace. The king was extremely happy to have the great Rishi Narada visit the palace on the occasion of the birth of his son. With great respect, the king took the sage to the cradle of the new born prince and asked the sage to bless the baby. Narada shivered with fear. He had no choice but to follow the instructions of Lord Shiva. With great reluctance, Narada chanted ‘Om Shri Ram Jaya Ram Jaya Jaya Ram’ into the ears of the baby. Narada closed his eyes tightly not wanting to see the tragedy that had happened on three previous occasions.

Narada felt the soft hands of the baby touch his cheeks and the baby told in a sweet voice, “Thank you, Oh great rishi, for taking me through three lowly births within a short time into this noble human birth. I was the one who was the worm in the cow dung. By the power of the mantra, I was immediately freed from that wretched body and was born as a puppy. You came and blessed me again with the mantra. By the power of the mantra, I was freed from all the suffering of that birth. I was born as a calf. You came and blessed me once again with the mantra. I got freed from that body and took birth as a prince in this noble and devoted family. How can I thank you enough for the great blessing that you have been giving birth after birth? Glory to you. Glory to the great Rama mantra. Glory to Lord Shiva, who always chants the Rama mantra in his mind.”

Narada was full of joy. He went back to Shiva and said, “Oh Lord, please forgive me for doubting the greatness of the mantra and doubting your words. Now I understand the glory of the mantra.”

Story of Sage Bharata

Here is a story from Srimad Bhagavatam. After ruling for several years, King Bharata went to Pulahashrama on the bank of river Gandaki to lead the rest of his life in austerity. Every morning he used to stand in the river facing the rising sun and worship the Lord as Suryanarayana. One day when he was worshipping thus, a solitary doe came to the river. She was in an advanced state of pregnancy. When she was drinking water, the terrifying roar of a lion was heard from nearby. She got frightened and tried to jump across the river. The strain was too much for the doe. She gave birth in the water and died. The new born deer calf was swept away in the current of the river.

The Rajarishi Bharata saw this whole episode and felt great pity for the young deer. He caught it and brought to his ashrama. He took great care of the small deer. He spent a large part of his time in procuring sustenance for the deer and in protecting it from other wild animals and forces of nature. The deer played with him all through the day and accompanied him everywhere that he went.

The mind of the sage was occupied only by the deer at all times. Thus he strayed from the intention with which he left his great kingdom and came to the forest. As he was already old, soon the time of his death came. The deer was at his death bed. Looking at the deer with great attachment, he left his body and the deer.

As his mind was filled with attachment to the deer at the time of his death, he was born as a deer. However, because of his devotion to God and the austerities he had practiced before the deer came into his life, he retained the memory of his past life even when in the deer body. He felt great sorrow that he had missed a great opportunity in his past life. Even though everything was conducive for him to strive to attain spiritual fulfillment, he had got distracted and wasted his life. He decided to make the best of the deer life. He went to stay near the ashramas of sages Pulastya and Pulaha. There he led as holy a life as possible in a deer body.

What decides the next birth?

The last thought at the moment of death decides the next birth (8-6). If the person forgets about all worldly things like pleasures, possessions, fame and relatives, and thinks only about God, then he will not have to take another birth (8-5).

How can we help a person on the death bed?

We should help a dying person to think only about God. The people around the person should assure him that everything will be taken care of by the Lord and that he should not worry about the people and possessions that he is leaving behind.

Both before and after death, the person's body should be draped in the clothes that he usually wears when following any vrata towards his favourite deity. The religious signs of his spiritual path should be applied on the person, like basma, kumkum, srivatsa, etc. For example, if he is a devotee of Ayyappa or Melmaruvathur Adiparashakti, his clothes that he wears during the pilgrimage and the mala should be worn on the person. If he used to do japa with a mala, that mala should be worn on the person. Whatever articles that the person used to consider holy during his life, they should be kept near the

person such that he can see or touch them. Ganga water or the sacred water from puja can be poured into his mouth. The mahaprasada from Jagannatha temple or tulsi leaf can be put into his mouth.

The holy name of his favourite deity should be loudly chanted continuously near him. This chanting should be started a few hours before the time of his death and should be continued till the body is taken away from the house. This will help the person who is dying and also help to reduce the grief of the people who are around.

What to do after the last rites?

The chanting can be done in memory of the person on the next day and during the memorial function on the thirteenth or sixteenth day as per the custom of the family.

Holy books can be read and spiritual talks can be arranged on the day after the body is disposed off and during the memorial function. It is a good idea to have a loud reading of this book during those occasions for the people to listen.

This will help the deceased person and also the people attending the functions.

How can we prepare ourselves for our own death?

Story of Guru Nanak and the miser

Once there was a rich man in a village. He was a great miser. He loved his money a lot. He never spent the money, nor gave anything to anyone. Suddenly one day he realized that he will die eventually. He did not want to part with his money when he died.

He went to the priest of the temple and asked him, “Sir, when I die can I take my money with me?” The priest told him, “What a foolish man you are! Has anyone taken their wealth with him when he died? When a man dies, his children fight over his wealth. Strangers cheat the children and take a part of the wealth for themselves. A man spends all his life earning wealth only to find that either the wealth leaves him or he has to leave the wealth at the time of his death.” The miser cried out aloud and ran back to his money in his house. He could not bear the idea that he had to part away from his wealth.

Whenever any pundit visited the village, he went and asked him the same question. The pundits pitied him and explained to him that he cannot take even a broken needle with him. The miser spent sleepless nights in great agony.

One day, Guru Nanak came to the village during his travels. The miser asked the great saint, “Oh Holy Sir, I have spent all my life in earning wealth. I understand that I will die one day. I want to take my wealth with me when I die. Everyone says that I cannot do so. Is there any way by which I can take my wealth with me?” Guru Nanak looked at the miser with great love and replied, “Oh dear, you have worked hard all your life to earn this wealth. Surely it is yours. You can take it with you when you die.” The miser jumped with joy. Finally he had found a saint who had spoken words of nectar. He fell at the feet of the saint and asked, “Oh great Sir, your words have brought me great joy. Please tell me how I

can take my wealth with me when I die. No one whom I have met so far seems to know that it can be done.”

Guru Nanak asked the miser, “Have you travelled to foreign countries?” The miser said, “Oh yes, several times. I have travelled to several countries to do business. That is how I have earned all my wealth.” Nanak asked, “Is the local currency useful in the foreign countries?” The miser replied, “No. They all have different currencies. But I can buy gold and gems for the local currency here and take them with me. Gold and gems are valued in all countries.” Guru Nanak said, “Yes. So, you have to do the same with your wealth. The local currency, and even gold and gems are not valued in the world after death. You need to convert all your wealth into a form that is valued across death.” The miser replied, “Yes. You are right. Please tell me into which form should I convert all my wealth into?”

Nanak replied, “Punya is the only one that is valued even after death. Spend your wealth for the good of the society by building schools, hospitals and temples. Help people in distress using your wealth. This way, you can convert your wealth into punya. Whatever you have converted into punya by such activities can be taken with you when you die. Whatever you have still left as currency, gold, gems, land, houses, etc have to be left back here. You cannot take them with you when you die.”

The rich man was very happy. He did not remain a miser any longer. He lived a simple life, and spent all his wealth for the good of the society.

Story of an interesting kingdom

Once there was a kingdom, which had a very peculiar practice. Every five years they used to select the next king. The king would rule the country with all royal grandeur. When five years was over, the king was sent in exile into an island. The island had a thick jungle with a lot of wild animals. The animals used to kill and eat the exiled king. Every five years the people of the kingdom used to send the king into exile with a lot of grief. No one wanted to become the king. When the term of a king was over, the royal elephant used to be sent with a garland into the streets of the capital. Whomever the elephant garlands would be forced to become the king. So everyone used to hide himself when the elephant was sent into the streets.

On one such occasion, a wise man from a distant kingdom entered the gates of the city. He did not know about the practice. The elephant found him and garlanded him. Everyone pitied the stranger. He was crowned as the king. Seeing the sadness on the face of the minister, the new king asked him why he was sad. The minister told the details. The new king asked the minister, “As I am the king, can’t I put an end to the practice?” The minister replied, “You can do anything except changing this practice.” The king replied, “If what has to happen cannot be changed, let me change what is to happen after that.” The king called the royal architect and ordered for the jungle on the island to be converted into a forest retreat. Keeping all the trees intact, the entire area was converted into a botanical garden. All the wild animals which lived there were housed in a zoo on the island. A palace with a huge library and a great institution of higher learning was built on the island for the kings who would be sent into exile.

At the end of five years, when the king was sent to the island according to the practice, the people sent the king into the retreat island with a lot of joy and gratitude. The king also lived there for the rest of his life amidst learning and peace.

How can we make sure that we remember the Lord at the last moment?

Death can come at any moment to anyone. So we should not hold any strong desire or hatred towards any person, object or situation. We should forgive the mistakes done by people. We should serve people with all love without expecting anything in return.

We should understand the real goal of life and be detached from pleasures, possessions, name and people. We can free our mind of pleasure and possessions only if we lead a moral life. Moral values like truthfulness, non-violence, absence of unfair possessions, simplicity, sense-control and humility will result in the detachment.

The thoughts that we entertain during the major part of our life will surface up in our mind at the time of death. So, we should make it a habit to remember the Lord at all times as much as possible (8-8). We should make sure that holy thoughts are driven deep into the subconscious mind. Whenever we sneeze or slip, the Lord's name should come naturally on our lips. We should always begin the day and end the day with thought of the Lord.

Importance of a moral life

There is an inviolable moral justice in the world which is overseen by the Lord. We will get only what we deserve. Good actions will eventually result in good. Bad actions will eventually result in bad. If we lead a moral life, we will feel secure with the Lord and will be able to develop love towards Him. If we lead an immoral life, we will feel always threatened and will be afraid of the Lord. So, to lead a peaceful life with devotion to the Lord, it is essential to lead a moral life.

Conclusion

We are all divine beings playing a human role for a short period of time. Understanding this will help us face life and death with the right attitude.

We should lead a life of high moral values, devotion to the Lord and service to others. We should spend time in holy company and study of holy books. True knowledge about our real nature will free us from all desires and regrets.

Thus, a glorious life, which is full of knowledge, devotion and service, will culminate in a glorious, happy and peaceful end.

Om Shri Ram Jaya Ram Jaya Jaya Ram

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I am a devotee of Sri Ramakrishna. Most of my understanding of religious, spiritual and philosophical ideas comes from the tradition Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda. The traditional foundation in Vedanta comes from the tradition of Swami Paramarthanandaji. You can visit the website <http://www.practicalphilosophy.in> for more details.

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Hari Om Tat Sat