

# Death and the Life Beyond

We fear death, said Francis Bacon, as children fear to go into the dark. Death is the unknown that breaks the continuity of our lives. Its threat is great because we do not know what lies beyond it. But death, after all, is as natural as birth, just as the falling of leaves in autumn is as natural as their unfolding in spring. Every form of life perishes and yields place to the new.

We can minimize death's threatening aspect if we know how to prepare for it, what the process is like, and what may come after it. A great deal of information and guidance, both ancient and modern, is available for us to learn about coping with death, if we will only take advantage of it.

## Preparing for Death

When an infant is to be born into the world, we make preparations for it. We do not let a birth happen without looking ahead on behalf of the infant, who cannot help itself. Similarly, all of us are going to die, so we should make preparations for that too, but in this case we can help ourselves.

The best preparation for a good death is a life well lived. So the sooner we start preparing to die well, the better we will live in the meanwhile. We can do various things that not only are good for our present life but will also help when death finally comes. Among them are the following:

1. Find out what to expect. Many books are available on events before, during, and after the death experience. Some are based on commonsense observations of the dying process. Others are accounts of those who have started to die, but then returned to life—who have thus had “near-death experiences.” Still others are the records of ancient teachings about death and the afterworld, preserved in that Wisdom Tradition which in its modern form is called Theosophy. Study some of these books to learn what they say the event will be like.
2. Learn to adapt—to “go with the flow.” There is no question that death is a major change in the conditions of our existence, just as birth was. Expect differences. One way to prepare for them is through meditation, by which you make contact with altered states of consciousness that are in some ways like those you will experience after death. Learn some techniques of meditation from reliable books or teachers.
3. Discover who you are. One of the important consequences of death is

that we have to adjust our sense of who and what we are. Ordinarily during life, we identify with our bodies, sensory perceptions, instincts, emotions, and brain-thoughts. But at or soon after death, we lose all of those, so we must readjust our sense of self-identity. That can be a shock, unless we are prepared for it. Meditation will help with the readjustment by letting you make contact with the deeper Self within, which is the real you.

4. Take daily stock of yourself. It is said that at the moment of death we review the life just past, as the events of our lives flash before us. You can prepare for that experience by going over the day's activities each night at bedtime. It is a good idea to keep a diary for recording your impressions and evaluating what you have done that day. This evaluation is not a judgment of what was good and bad, but a simple awareness of one's actions and responses. Such little reviews along the way make the big final review run smoother.
5. Establish a frame of mind transcending everyday experiences. You may find it helpful to use certain affirmations or mantras. Some Christians use the "Jesus prayer" or the rosary in this way. Hindus use a mantra meaning, "I am That [the Absolute]." Some people find the following mantra helpful:

O hidden life, vibrant in every atom,  
O hidden light, shining in every creature,  
O hidden love, embracing all in oneness,  
May all who feel themselves as one with thee  
Know they are therefore one with every other.
6. Think about life in a larger context. Be aware that your present life is only one phase in the great cycle of your existence, one life or incarnation out of many, all governed by the law of karma. Remember that what you are now is the result of your past actions and thoughts and that how you act and think today is determining what will be tomorrow.
7. Visualize yourself as you would become. Imagine yourself bathed in a glorious clear light, which circulates through the whole universe, flowing through you and joining you to all life.

There are many other ways, general and particular, described in Theosophical writings to help prepare for the experience of death.

## **Process of Dying**

When we observe another die, death seems to be a closing down and withdrawal from life—a negative process. But those who have gone through the early stages and then returned to earthly life have reported it quite differently. Persons who have had a near-death experience describe a deep sense of peace and well-being, an awareness that they are out of the body. Unconfined by the body, they have found that consciousness can move freely, observe without obstruction, and travel where it wishes.

Early in the postmortem state, there is a review of the past life, like a rapid motion picture. Then the dying person passes through a tunnel or great darkness into a bright light on the other side, where a world of surpassing beauty awaits. The dying person is met by friends or a protective guide—“helpers” who explain the future and orient the newcomer to this new world.

With some variation, the foregoing details are common to the experiences of those who have nearly died but were revived. They also accord both with ancient traditions from Egypt and Greece about what the after-death state is like and with modern Theosophy. There is every reason to believe that they represent accurately the typical experience of dying. They show that there is nothing to fear. Indeed, for those who have had a near-death experience, death holds no terror because they know what it is—a comforting, joyous experience, the natural end of life.

The process of dying turns out to be as Walt Whitman described it in *Song of Myself*:

All goes onward and outward,  
nothing collapses,  
And to die is different  
from what anyone supposed, and luckier.

We can help others who are in the process of dying by allowing the transition to take place in a quiet and peaceful atmosphere. We cannot always share our convictions about life after death with them. But our calm acceptance of death can help them toward a more peaceful attitude.

## **Life After Death**

According to the Theosophical tradition, when the process of bodily dying is completed, our personality undergoes a transformation. The impulses, tendencies, emotions, habitual thoughts, and automatic reactions, which we ordinarily identify as our “self,” are sorted out and ordered. All those products of our past life are divided into two major parts. One consists of the entirely personal and selfish, the transitory aspect of the past life, which forms a shell or cocoon around our inner

core. That core, the other part of us, consists of our generous, unselfish nature, transcending the merely personal. It includes everything from our life that is worth preserving.

The development of the spiritual core within our personal shell is like the gestation of a butterfly's chrysalis within its cocoon. While that development is going on, according to *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* and also to ancient and modern investigations, we may slumber unconsciously, or we may have various experiences—some idyllic and heaven-like, others distressing and hellish. Those experiences are not rewards or punishments, but merely the projections of our own inner states and potentials. We do not suddenly become perfect after death; our fears, longings, joys, and sorrows remain and are played out in the afterlife.

Finally, the inner spiritual core of the past life, the good fruit, is absorbed into our enduring individual Self, the real in us. One purpose of meditation during life is to help us identify with that inner Self and so to prepare for the easy transition of consciousness to it after death. When the transition is complete, the shell dissipates and we awake to a completely happy, heaven-like state of comfort and consolation, in which there is no pain or sorrow, only joy and fulfillment.

The length of our stay in that heaven world cannot be measured by earthly time, for it is a subjective state to which terrestrial time is irrelevant. But after we have been fully rested and renewed, we feel once again the urge for experience in the world. We hear the call of life. And then we begin the process of being born anew in a fresh body to start the cycle over again.

As death always follows birth, so rebirth inevitably follows death. Being born and dying are not singular events but boundaries between two alternating phases of our existence—life and death. Our whole existence, like that of all nature around us, is one of cycles. The annual cycle of summer and winter, the monthly cycle of the waxing and waning moon, the diurnal cycle of day and night, the systolic cycle of the heart's contraction and relaxation, and many other such cycles mark the periods of our lives. Life and death, seen from this perspective, are just stages in an ongoing process. And dying is not an end, but a turning point from one stage to the next—different from what anyone supposed, and luckier.

The Wisdom Tradition holds that life and death, being born and dying, are only temporary events in our vast cycle of existence. We go on repeating them on earth until we have learned all this world has to teach us. Then we move on to other forms of activity and rest, in an endless pilgrimage through all the worlds of the cosmos. What we think of as death is only a temporary pause, a minor turning point in an adventure that is grounded in Divine Reality and therefore has no beginning and no end.

**For Further Information**

The following materials may be purchased at [www.questbooks.net](http://www.questbooks.net).

Bendit, Laurence. *The Mirror of Life and Death*.

Besant, Annie. *Death and After*.

Bland, Betty. *The Near-Death Experience: A Theosophical Perspective*. Audio CD.

Brooks, Richard. *I'm Dead! Now What?* DVD.

Burnier, Radha. *Death and Immortality*. DVD

Grosz, Anton. *Letters to a Dying Friend*.

———. *Make a Conscious Transition*.

Hodson, Geoffrey. *Through the Gateway of Death*.

———. *Through the Gateway of Death*. Audio CD.

Leadbeater, C. W. *The Life After Death*.

Mills, Joy. *What is Death?* Audio CD.

Pelgrin, Mark. *And a Time to Die*.

Perkins, James. *Through Death to Rebirth*. Audio CD.