

10 October 1977

READING 2

BIRTH AND DEATH

Referring back to a question asked at the Meditation Meeting (Sept. 13), may I now lead on from there? Recent realizations of my own have shown me very clearly that these two expressions – Self-realization and Self-remembering – only come together when we forsake the ordinary point of view about ‘birth and death’ and come to accept the totally different point of view of enlightened men at many times and in many places. At the beginning of this academic year, I would like to make a statement about those two points of view, because some recent practical evidence has given us a better insight into the subject in modern terms.

The first view is that, if asked about birth and death, common opinion at all time has held that we did not exist before birth, and we cease to exist after physical death. Or, at best, that we emerge at birth from deep unconsciousness, like waking from sleep, and relapse in the end into deep unconsciousness at death. The misery and hopelessness of this point of view was vividly expressed by the Latin poet, Catullus, in three lines which can be translated as follows:

Suns may rise and suns may set;
For us, once our brief light goes out,
It is night – perpetual night –
And one long sleep.

What would be the use of living and what the point of all our sweat and tears if this materialistic point of view is accepted? The end would always be annihilation whatever we thought or did, and it would be natural to live the hedonistic life: ‘Let us eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die.’

But it is easy to show that this nihilistic view does not explain many observable facts if one goes deeply into the nature of human life. This second view has been expressed by wise men of many cultures as different as those of ancient Egypt, or Tibet, or writers of the Indian *Vedanta*, or the sources of other great religions like Christianity. We overlook these facts deliberately because, in our ignorance, there seems to be no alternative; though deep in human nature lies the belief in some form of continued existence.

In the West it was the Greeks who were most vocal about it from the 5th century BC of whom Plato gives the fullest description. According to Plato the incorporeal part of man’s nature – usually translated ‘Soul’ – comes into the physical body from a higher and more Divine realm of Being. For Plato, it was *birth* which was the sleeping and forgetting since the Soul, being born into the body, comes from a state of great awareness to a much less Conscious state; and in the course of physical life it forgets the Truths which it knew while in the out-of-body state. Death, by implication, is an awakening and a remembering, not a sleep.

It is important to realise that this second point of view is based, not on supposition, but on actual recorded experience.

Actually, every human being who is born has the experience of Unity with the Divine while in the process of physical death; but, since there is no way of communicating it, each one

promptly forgets it since he finds no confirmation from other people and thinks that his experience is unique.

It is only great artists, poets, and religious mystics who have developed a language of their own in which to describe it. Here is an example which I translated years ago because of similar experiences of my own. It come from a medieval Sikh poet, who observed such as 'out-of-body state' while alive:

I looked at death, I viewed my end of life.
The dying body that I saw was mine,
Yet felt my Spirit separate, calm and high
On the wide ocean floating far and free,
That ocean men describe as ecstasy
Which all-pervaded is with Light and Joy
And body's death is like the breaking of a toy.

One could quote endless examples of such experiences, but I need only here refer to that stanza of Wordsworth's famous 'Ode on the Intimations of Immortality in early childhood' which begins:

Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting...

People, even ardent Christians, ask why it is that, if this is true, there is no mention of it in the Gospels; yet it is there, on every page! It is quite impossible to understand the Gospels if one takes them only as referring to the physical body, without taking into consideration the subtle and the Causal bodies as well.

On that level, death in the Gospels is often referred to as a 'wedding'; and Christians are enjoined to 'keep their loins girded and their lamps lighted, because they do not know at what hour the Bridegroom will come'. The whole of the twenty-second and twenty-fifth chapters of St. Matthew's gospel are about this subject, chiefly illustrated by these three parables of the Wedding Feast, of the Ten Virgins and of the Talents, which certainly cannot be understood on the physical level only.

Similarly, it is impossible to understand many of Mr. Ouspensky's sayings without the idea of the recurrence of lives and the memory of past existence, or of the Shankaracharya's teaching (especially in many of his stories) except from this strangely different point of view.

There is one caution we must remember, however. This Knowledge of the ultimate meeting with the Divine Self is invariably degraded if described in ordinary workaday language; and, therefore, wise men keep it safely in a golden casket, never to be spoken of by word of mouth, because it has to be experienced and conveyed on the subtle and Causal levels. Therefore, we should avoid lightly discussing the matter, and simply relate any individual experience we may have with this idea. Otherwise imagination runs wild.

Until you have had time to read the second issue of *The Bridge* and perhaps the book *Life after Life* referred to there, it would be best to dwell on the following story used by the Shankaracharya to explain why he recommends us to keep the thought of the Param-Atman always in mind and *give up* all those customary thoughts and concepts which conflict with it. Also why our Meditation is such a valuable training for this:

A rich man used to go to a wise teacher, but would always talk to him about trivial matters like his household affairs and the people around him who were always uppermost in his mind. One day the teacher went to his house and gave a needle and thread to his wife. 'Tell your husband' he said to her, 'that he seems to be planning to take all his material possessions with him when he goes into the next world. Please ask him to take this needle also with him for my sake, as I shall need it there for repairing my torn clothes.'

When she relayed this to her husband he understood how temporary were those possessions upon which he set such a high value.

(Record, 16 January 1972)

While our physical life is wholly occupied with acquiring possessions, the Causal life can only be achieved by renunciation of the unwanted. The first beatitude was:

Blessed are the spiritually poor; for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

At our meetings also we should concern ourselves more with what we can take with us – namely Bhakti or devotion to the Param-Atman – and less with the transient things we shall have to leave behind.

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