

Agnus H. Haddow Dying, Death and After Death

From: Journal of Religion and Physical Research 1976-2006, Comm. USA y2000 v23 July p133

The event of death is always astounding; our philosophy never reaches, never possesses it, we are always at the beginning of our catechism; always the definition is yet to be made, What is Death?"

Ralph Waldo Emerson

Abstract:

The definition of "Death" is considered noting that the Law does not make a precise definition, there being various criteria in different countries to ascertain brain death. Physical postmortem changes are examined and also what happens to the soul at death with reference to Near-Death and Out-of-the-Body Experiences, Astral Projection and Death-Bed Visions. What religion has to say about death and after-death states is traced from primitive societies, ancient Egypt, Israel and Greece, Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism and Christianity. Information about the afterlife through mediumistic communications show many common features, especially division into "Earthbound and Heavenly Spheres" and the possible progression of the soul.

What is Death? The Oxford English Dictionary defines Death as "the final cessations of the vital functions", and until comparatively recently death has been regarded as the complete and permanent cessation of respiration and circulation. However, it is possible for nonexistent pulse and breathing, unresponsive reflexes in the eyes or limbs, nothing seen on an electrocardiogram (ECG) and electroencephalogram (EEG) and still life could be present in the body. If circulatory and respiratory functions of the heart and lungs have ceased, it is possible for these to be restored and integrated function of both cells and organs can then continue for prolonged periods with the aid of special equipment.

The Law lays down certain rules for the taking of life but does not make a precise definition of death. In legal terms, death has taken place when it is certified thus by a doctor after he has observed the physical signs. A person may appear dead and be permanently unconscious but still breathing without any external assistance and therefore if properly nursed and obtaining nourishment, still maintaining a state of being. As example is seen in the case of Karen Ann Quinlan in the U.S.A. which resulted in a legal wrangle between the legal authorities and her parents who wanted her to be taken off a life support machine; the parents won the case and when the machine was stopped Karen continued living by breathing naturally.

The higher centers of the forebrain constitute the seat of consciousness whereas the mechanics of heartbeat and respiration are controlled by the brain-stem. Karen had a sound brain-stem, her vital functions were still operative despite the total loss of consciousness. Professor Ian Kennedy has suggested in his British Broadcasting Corporation Reith Lectures that Karen's state was not "death" which he defined as total brain death when both the brain-stem and the forebrain are not functioning.

In 1966, the French National Academy of Medicine stated that someone could be pronounced dead if it could be proved that the brain would never be able to assume control of the body's vital functions. The reason for this statement was to permit organ transplantation and to ensure that

seemingly dead donors were not medically and therefore legally pronounced dead before actual death had occurred.

The first country to legally accept brain death was Finland in 1971 when its National Health Board publicized criteria for it. Other countries had previously established guidelines, e.g. the U.S.A. in 1968 by the Committee of Harvard Medical School, but Finland was the first to enact legislation regarding it. Britain produced guidelines in 1976 by the Conference of Medical Royal Colleges which later in 1979 added eight points with a final statement affirming that "the identification of brain death means that the patient is dead, whether or not the functions of some organs, such as the heartbeat, is still maintained by artificial means." By this time there were over 30 sets of brain death criteria published, thus snowing disagreement even in medical circles.

What happens to the body at death? The minor signs of death are the relaxation of the facial muscles which produce the staring eye and the gaping mouth, giving the livid appearance known as the Hippocratic face; loss of the curves of the back; discoloration of the skin which becomes waxy- yellow and loses its pink transparency at the finger webs. These are due to the chemical processes which cause the body to decay. Physical postmortem changes can be deduced from the functions of the cardiovascular system. As no oxygen is being carried by the blood to various parts of the body there is cellular death, the first affected bring the enzyme system. The brain cells, the conduction system and the tissue of the kidneys cannot survive and suffer irreversible change. This is followed by the softening of the brain (brain death), the breaking down of cells, the degeneration of tissue and the swelling of the liver and the kidneys as well as of other cells in tissues with more complex functions.

After a variable period of residual activity, enzyme production ceases and the body cools. In elderly persons, cooling often starts before death. The body does not reach the temperature of its surroundings for 20-24 hours. Blood which has been circulating in the body becomes stagnant, the ground substance of the body degenerates, bacteria are left to multiply at the expense of the tissues and the process of putrefaction begins. Rigor mortis or muscular rigidity develops from 4-10 hours after death and persists for 3-4 days. All these changes which happen to the body after death are consistent with any physical system which eventually must run down because death is necessary biologically.

What happens to the individual consciousness or soul of man at death is a question outside the sphere of medicine and one for which philosophy and religion have their various answers. The Greek philosophers regarded the body as the prison-house of the soul, and many, e.g. Plato, considered life as a preparation for death whereby the soul is released from the confines of the human body. In Plato's *Phaedo* where he describes the death of Socrates by taking poison, the philosopher's last words were a request that a cock be sacrificed to Aesculapius (the God of Healing) as a thanksgiving for being cured of the disease of being in a human body.

Knowledge of what happens when death is experienced can only be given by those actually dying. Much more in this regard has been done in the East where such knowledge is deemed important in preparing for the moment of death so that a rebirth in another body could be affected quickly. Thus, some Tibetan lamas, in the act of dying, explained to their pupils the process of death as it was actually happening in analytical and elaborate detail. The three chief

symptoms of death according to Tibetan lamas are (i) a bodily sensation of pressure; (ii) a bodily sensation of clammy coldness gradually changing to feverish heat; (iii) a feeling that the body is being blown into atoms. (*Tibetan Book of the Dead*, 1976a).

There have been incidents of people being pronounced clinically dead and later reviving. Such people have described what they experienced through the death process although they had difficulty finding words for adequate expression of their experiences. This is to be expected as a postmortem world is different and beyond our senses, and the language we use describes our sense-impressions in this world.

Dr. Raymond A. Moody, who taught the philosophy of medicine, studied more than 100 subjects who had experienced "clinical death" and survived, the results of his studies being published as *Life After Life* (1975). In his collation of these experiences he observed certain common features, which, although not all present in each case, nevertheless shed light on the death state and its immediate aftermath. Moody found that the individual could have an "out-of-the-body" experience, i.e. he feels that he is not confined to his material body but his point of consciousness is in an energy or spiritual body. Various writers have different names for this energy body and also recognize different kinds of energy bodies, e.g. the "etheric double" which is a replica of the physical body and is the link between the physical and the "astral body" which is the primary vehicle of consciousness or "soul".

The dying person's vision appears more powerful and his hearing is different in that he can pick up thoughts. He is unable to touch anything and communicate with those who are still alive. Sometimes the spirits of relatives or friends who have died may be seen. While in this spiritual body he senses floating in dark space and has a feeling of joy, love and quiet peacefulness. In many instances at or near death, noises are heard. These may take the form of a loud buzzing or ringing, or, in a few instances, beautiful music is heard. At the same time there is often the sensation of being pulled through a dark tunnel and some experience seeing light at the end of the tunnel. Emerging at the end of the tunnel into the light, sometimes a kindly "Being of Light" is seen who asks non-verbally for one's life to be evaluated. There is no sense of time and any person who is met has no particular age. If the person revives, he has the sensation of being pulled back through the tunnel, often being reluctant to leave the blissful atmosphere for the contrasting harsh reality of earthly life. After such an experience, many express no fear of death and their views on its relationship to life is altered. Moody was aware of the shortcomings of his work in that he did not try to make any statistical analysis of his material to find out, e.g. how often the different features of the experience happened; he was more concerned with what the dying experience was like for some people.

In general, Moody's findings were confirmed with some reservations by Fred Schoonmaker (1979), a cardiologist, who interviewed over 2,300 survivors of acute life-threatening situations since 1961, talking informally soon after their crises. He found that 60% of them reported experiences similar to Moody's.

As far back as 1926, Sir William Barrett, a distinguished physicist and President of the English Society for Psychical Research, published a list of cases entitled *Death Bed Visions* which included descriptions of the spirit leaving the body; the experience of hearing music and the

dying person seeing someone who was dead. He was particularly interested in a case where the dying person saw someone who was dead but this was unknown to him at the time.

The materialist views the personality as ceasing at death, all deathbed visions being considered to be the products of brain activity as it dies. On the other hand, the traditional Astral Projection theory views death as the releasing of the astral body (soul, personality) from the physical body, after hovering near it before going on to other worlds. The etheric body linking the astral and physical bodies dissipates after a few days. The dying person may see the departure of the astral body, experiencing the sensation of separation and entry into the astral world where he will glimpse spirits of the dead welcoming him. In this astral existence he will have the opportunity to evolve to higher spheres in more subtle bodies.

Karlis Osis, the Director of Research at the American Society for Psychical Research, in collaboration with E. Haraldsson, attempted to find out whether deathbed visions were evidences of an afterlife or due to the malfunctions of a dying brain. If the latter was so, then these visions would depend much on the patient's expectations and his religious background as well as the cause of death and the drugs being administered. Questionnaires were sent out to 2,000 doctors and an equal number of nurses in the U.S.A., asking them details of patients in their care who had died, their treatment, cause of death, religious beliefs and an account of any visions experienced by the patients. Received were 1,004 replies. In India, 704 medical personnel were interviewed and asked a similar range of questions. The results of the survey were published in the classic report "Deathbed Observations by Physicians and Nurses" (1981). Those who replied to the questionnaire or who were interviewed had seen at least 35,000 patients die but only 10% of this number were conscious in their last hours, most of them being undisturbed by sedation.

In 753 cases the patients experienced an elevated mood during their last hours, painful discomfort rather than anxiety was reported more often. Visions were reported by 888 individuals (hallucinations of a nonhuman nature) in accordance with local traditional images, e.g. seeing heaven or a beautiful scene; only two patients described experiences equating to something like Hell. Apparitions were seen by 1,370 people, which were mainly of deceased relatives and friends, the majority appearing to have come to take the dead person away. The visions and mood changes were not found to be influenced by the effect of drugs and the different causes of death. In comparing the Indian statistics with the American, it was found that there was no marked differences between them, the experiences being remarkably similar. As a result of his research, Osis concluded that it "does not clinch the answer to survival after death but it does show that the information from the dying is consistent with the idea of life after death."

The psychiatrist, Dr. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, for more than 5 years counselled patients, studying their emotional impact of confronting death and their experiences convinced her that death is a "transition - a peaceful and benign experience to all cultures" in which the physical body is "shed as a butterfly comes out of a cocoon." (1970).

All religions have something to say about death and what lies thereafter although their descriptions of the latter vary considerably. Some are quite definite in making detailed maps of the future life and what happens to the various souls who inhabit it while others speak in

generalities without being specific about the geography there. All the major religions have the process of Judgement after death which determines the future of the individual soul. This is inevitable and from it there is no escape. The soul's state of being is put alongside what the Deity demands and judgement is made accordingly.

Most primitive societies regard death as unnatural and believe in a postmortem existence of some kind which has no real break in the continuity of life as they lived it. If death is not caused by violence it is generally ascribed to the action of supernatural beings as gods or spirits, or to witchcraft; it is exceptional when death is ascribed to natural causes. When a person is sick and perhaps dying, the main aim is to stop these supernatural entities, who may be responsible for his condition, from attacking him in his weak state. Thus, among the Melanesians of South Pentecost in the New Hebrides, the friends and relatives gather round the person who appears to be near death, and make a continuous noise frightening away the attacking spirits who prefer solitude for their actions. The collective power of the group is thought to maintain the patient until the crisis is passed and he is on his way to recovering or until death occurs.

Although the ancient Egyptians regarded death and its aftermath of prime importance they had no specific preparation for it. *The Egyptian Book of the Dead* (Wallis Budge, E.A., 1985) contains all the knowledge necessary to the dead for their salvation and included prayers, hymns, petitions and incantations which if recited on the appropriate occasions by qualified persons, would protect the Egyptian in the underworld and lead him into the presence of Osiris to be reborn. Mummification preserved the physical body which was liable to decay and thus enable the soul body to travel between heaven and the grave.

The ancient Hebrews, in common with primitive tribes, regarded the life of man as being natural and normal, death being a disturbance of this state by something unnatural and abnormal. The Old Testament story of the Garden of Eden shows that death was not thought of and therefore not mentioned, until an abnormal state of affairs had been brought about by the intervention of the serpent. Whereas the modern mind is occupied with the physical cause of death, the particular disease and the failure of remedial treatment, the Israelites thought of death as an act of God, early death under distressing circumstances being often regarded as a judgement against sin.

Throughout the period of the Old Testament there was a general official belief that at death good and bad alike went to Sheol, the "land of the shades", where they had a shadowy existence (*Proverbs* 9:18). Sheol was pictured as being beneath the earth, a place of darkness (*Job* 10:22) and the opposite of the active, vital life on earth.

Side by side with this official belief was the popular belief that man would survive death and enjoy the blessings of a better life than that of Earth. Two centuries before the Christian era the official belief had been discarded by many in favor of the popular conception. This was influenced by the exile of the Israelites to Babylon and the dissolution of Israel as a nation bringing about a new relationship between God and the individual and a development of belief in immortality (*Job* 19:25-27). This will happen on a "Day of the Lord" ushered in by a Messiah and involves a Divine Judgement, first on Israel then on the other nations of the world. The righteous will be resurrected and rewarded with bliss in a recreated Earth (*Psalms* 63:20) and the

wicked will be condemned to terrible punishment but a punishment designed to heal and not to avenge. By the time that Jesus came, a strong belief in the life to come was widely held by the Jews with a developing conception of God as a God of the whole universe.

Among the ancient Greeks and Romans there was a wide range of beliefs in death and the afterlife but nowhere is there complete certainty. There was a wistful longing for an existence beyond death and sometimes the whole matter was dismissed as fanciful. In common with the early Hebrew belief, the early Greeks regarded the afterlife as a shadowy place inhabited by ghostlike figures. In these early days the only thing which brightened this conception is the idea of the Elysian Fields and the Isles of the Blest, where the heroes were destined to go after death. In these abodes were peace, the absence of work, sorrow and adverse weather conditions — a blissful existence thought in terms of what was experienced on Earth.

There was not any general conviction of personal immortality in the national religions of Greece and Rome as the individual had no real existence outside the city state which was all-important. Those who wished for a godlike existence after death and were prepared to go through a rigorous initiation process were attracted to the various mystery religions, e.g. the Orphic and Eleusian Mysteries which involved myths of dying and rebirth enacted in dramatic form. The Orphic Mysteries included belief in reincarnation when there were opportunities of rebirth in this life. Religion holds that "Death is itself only an initiation into another form of life than that of which it is the ending." (*Tibetan Book of the Dead*, 1976b).

The four major world religions — Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam and Christianity — believe that there is a subtle and death-surviving element in the physical body, whether it be the Hindu "Atman", the Muslim "Ruh", the Christian "Soul" or the Buddhist conception of a complex aggregate of activities with life as its function. At death there is a separation of the psyche from the gross body, the former entering a new life while the latter decays. The aim of preparation for death in these religions is to assist the psyche in its transmission from one state to another so that it is less traumatic as possible, and its future existence will be for its well-being.

The whole of the Christian life should be a preparation for death in that a relationship is cultivated with God through faith in Jesus Christ, the transition through the death process is natural and a closer relationship with God experienced. The immediate period before death is regarded by the Church as an opportunity to assist the dying to withstand the temptations which sought to undermine his faith. Thus, in the Middle Ages, there were many manuals on "How to Die Well", e.g. *The Book of the Craft of Dying* attributed to the English mystic Richard Rolle (71290-1349)

Christian ideas of the afterlife have their roots in preceding Hebrew thought, viz. a development from a shadowy Sheol to a reward of bliss for the righteous in heaven and punishment for the wicked in Hell. At the Second Coming of Christ, there will be a resurrection of the dead and final judgement. It is generally regarded that the righteous would be raised in a spiritual body which fitted the context of heaven which they shared with Christ (*Second Corinthians* 15:35-45.) Heaven and Hell are not really places as characters, e.g. John Milton has Satan admitting "The mind is in its own place, and in itself can make a heaven of hell and a hell of heaven" (*Paradise Lost*).

Islam, being 600 years younger than Christianity, contains some Jewish and Christian features in the inevitability of the Day of Judgement, Hell- fire and the bliss of Heaven (Paradise) for those who please Allah (God). The word "Islam" means "submission", the whole duty of man being to submit to Allah, the absolute, transcendent Deity. It is ultimately the will of Allah which controls man's destiny either to salvation or to damnation. The exact hour of each person's death is foreordained in the Surah 16:61 of the Islamic sacred Book, the Koran. At the last Judgement each being is either assigned to Heaven or to Hell. Heaven is depicted as a sensuous paradise with gardens and fountains, populated by the righteous wearing beautiful clothes. Food and wine will be served to them by celestial youths and lovely maidens who would wait on their commands.

The earliest Hindu conception of the soul and its fate after death is chiefly found in the 5 funeral hymns of the Rig Veda ("The Veda or Verses or Psalms"). Although burial was practiced, cremation was the usual way for the dead to reach the next world. This was located in the third vault of the heavenly kingdom which is the home of eternal light and the highest region of the sun. In this realm all families will be reunited, there will be no deformity of the body or sickness, the streams are flowing with milk, honey and wine and there are ponds filled with ghee (clarified butter); here the righteous dead enjoy a life of indolent, material bliss of infinite duration. In the earliest Vedas there are few ideas about Hell. It seems that the wicked will be annihilated by death or imprisoned in a dark underground abyss. It was not until the ritual treatises called Brahmanas, that the concept of future punishment was developed.

By 500 B.C. there was a change in these religious views. The concept of reincarnation was introduced whereby all living things are in a continual round of rebirths (samsara) after death, passing from one life to another. The only way to escape from samsara is by attaining liberation and reaching a transcendental bliss beyond this material world, being absorbed in Brahma, the Ground of All Being.

The vast majority of people did not achieve liberation at death due to not reaching what is required in their lives. Karma (literally "action") is the Law of Retributive Justice which determines what kind of rebirth they will have. The whole of the Hindu's life is a preparation for death and a good karma.

In common with many Hindus, the Buddhist believes that the last thought of the dying is of prime importance to his future being. If the mental state at death is good, a pleasant rebirth will take place; if it is bad, an unpleasant one. The deceased will be born into the spheres of desire, matter or non-matter, according to the form of the last thought and "to die with the thought fixed on space (i.e. the Void)" (*Vedanta Sutra*) is to attain Nirvana, i.e. the highest possible freedom from all distractions, and chiefly a negative condition — a passionless peace. This is not so much extinction as an exalted state of consciousness in which the little self ("atman") is swallowed up in the Great Self (Atman). The moment when this happens is the moment of Enlightenment and can be achieved in this life, e.g. by the Buddha himself.

There is no permanent soul in Buddhism, just a number of aggregates make up a person in life. Death marks the boundary of a particular bundle of aggregates, but the actions taken place by them in life will generate new events in the future - this is what is meant in rebirth. As a light

kindles another light without passing over to it, so there is rebirth without anything transmigrating. In this respect it is different from the Hindu concept. There is no annihilation because if the new being is not the same as the old, it is not unconnected with it. Like the Hindu, rebirth is governed by Karma.

There is no agreement among the Buddhist schools on existence after death. Some believe rebirth to be instantaneous, others regard the time between death and rebirth to be 49 days (*Tibetan Book of the Dead*, 1976c). The hells into which persons may fall after death are described in terrifying terms although some Buddhists claim that these accounts should be interpreted symbolically and not literally.

A "medium" or "sensitive" is a person in which consciousness is withdrawn to an interior level of the self, and, at the same time, can communicate by writing or speaking to those around. The communication through the medium is purported to come through discarnate beings. The whole history of Spiritualism abounds in such communications and, although some can be explained by Extra Sensory Perception (ESP), drawing from the minds of other persons or from the medium's memory or subconscious, each has to be judged on its merits.

There is general agreement among the communications concerning the state after death that there is a process of possible evolution for the soul. This is determined by a kind of judgement whereby the soul passes to a Plane of Existence which is appropriate to its true being. There may be disagreement among communications as to the number of the planes but there is agreement on the division into Earthbound and Heavenly Spheres, which are concentric round the earth and extend into space, interpenetrating each other. According to the soul's vibrations, which mirror its true nature, it gravitates to the sphere with which it is in accord. The Heavenly Spheres have higher vibrations with the highest sphere being associated with the Deity and composed of light. Only by spiritual development and progression or by special invitation from a being in a higher sphere, can a soul enter a sphere above. One communication refers to such progression thus: "If we as individuals become more perfect then the realm in which we live, we, ipso facto, become worthy of advancing to a higher state and we do..." (Borgia, 1954).

Each soul is assisted in its development by a Spirit Guide ("Guardian Angel") which has been allocated to him. They never force ideas on those under their care but view them from a distance until allowed to give guidance, thus the expression of free will is never violated. The Spirit World is a world of thought where to think is to act and this is instantaneous. There is no hunger, thirst, fatigue, illness or pain experienced by the spirit body which is always in perfect health. The mind is the storehouse of every action and thought experienced during earthly life which are registered in the subconscious.

Time and space exist in the Spiritual Realm but they are conceived in a different way from that of the earth world. In the Spirit World there are no recurring seasons nor day and night therefore there is no need to measure time. Yet there are two conceptions of time that exist there which depend on the attitude of the souls living in the Spiritual Planes. One conception, like that on earth is purely relative. A few moments of pain may seem like a long time to the mind whereas a long period of happiness may appear to have passed very quickly. In the Heavenly Spheres where there is happiness, the inhabitants are not conscious of the passage of time. The reverse is

true on the lower spheres, where there is much darkness and suffering; such existence which may take up a few years of earth-time will seem like an eternity to the sufferer. The other conception of time must necessarily come into being when contact is made with the earth world and therefore entering into earth-time, the exact date and time being known. Space also must exist in the Spirit World and it is governed up to a point by the same law as on the Earth plane. Spirit bodies can "see" things near and far in this realm; immense distances can be traversed by the power of thought alone. Thought can annihilate time in its relation to space, but it cannot annihilate space.

The psychologist, C.C. Jung (1875-1961), regarded the majority of the world's religions as complicated systems of preparation for death so that life has no significance except as a preparation for the ultimate goal of death. With reference to Christianity and Buddhism he noted that the meaning of existence is consummated in its end. In dealing with some patients he observed indications of approaching death with peculiar changes of the personality long before it actually occurred. He was surprised to find that for the unconscious, death is relatively unimportant, and it is more interested in how one dies, i.e. whether the attitude of consciousness is adjusted to dying or not. From a psychological point of view, he maintains that if life continues in the hereafter the only form of an existence is that of a psychic one because the life of the psyche requires no space and no time and that it would be "a logical continuation of the psychic life of old age."

Bibliography

- Barrett, W.F., *Death-Bed Visions*, London, Methuen, 1926.
- Borgia, A. *Life in the World Unseen*, Odhams Press, 1954, p.67.
- Evans-Wentz, W.Y., ed., *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, ed. Oxford, England, Oxford University Press, 1976a, pp.93-94, footnote 3.
- Evans-Wentz, W.Y., ed., *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, ed. Oxford, England, Oxford University Press, 1976b, p.xiv.
- Evans-Wentz, W.Y., ed., *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, ed. Oxford, England, Oxford University Press, 1976c, Chapter 3.
- Job* 10:22.
- Job* 19:25-27.
- Jung, C.G., *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, London, England, Collins, 1963, p.351.
- Kubler-Ross, E. *On Death and Dying*, Tavistock, 1970.
- Milton, J. *Paradise Lost*, Book I, 254-255.
- Moody, R.A. *Life After Life*, Covinda, CA:, Mockingbird, 1975.
- Osis, K. and Haraldsson, E. "Deathbed Observations by Physicians and Nurses", *Parapsychology Monograph* No. 3, New York: Parapsychological Foundation, 1981.
- Plato, *Phaedo*, 118a.
- Proverbs* 9:18.
- Psalms* 63:20.
- Schoonmaker, F. Denver Cardiologist Discloses Findings after 18 years of Near-Death Research, *Anabiosis*, 1979,1, pp.1-2.
- Second Corinthians* 15:35-45.

Vedanta Sutra.

Wallis Budge, E.A. *The Book of the Dead*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985, Arcana edition.