

Death, Karma and Reincarnation

(A chapter from the book "[Nature of Human Thought](#)")

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Death is the most certain thing for any living entity and yet we know so little about it. It may come early or later in life but the inevitable always happens. Yet we carry out our actions and behave as if we are immortal and death does not enter into our scheme of things. However if we understand death then we will really understand life and how to live it fruitfully and happily.

Almost in every society the spiritual writings are about the art of living which prepare human beings for death. Thus they contain intricate details of heaven and hell. Some religions also make the description of hell extremely frightening so that people will change their behavior to avoid it. Majority of spiritual writings is about how to live properly so that one can escape the cycle of birth and death. In all these writings the underlying philosophy is of the continuity of soul.

Thus Egyptians believed that eventually resurrection will take place and so elaborate mummification ritual for treating the dead body was developed. Similarly in other religions the ritual of dead body burial was carried out.

In Indian Yogic tradition transition of soul from body to body is like changing into new clothes. It goes through all the living species and evolves towards godhead after its karmas (Sanskrit for actions/deeds) are resolved through various births. Katha Upanishad, Patanjali Yoga Darshan and Brahma Sutra do talk briefly about the rebirth of soul in human form and how it can also be transformed into various species⁴³. Patanjali Yoga says, "The transformation of one species into another is caused by inflowing of nature. Good or bad deeds are not the direct cause of this transformation but only act as a breaker of the obstacles to natural evolution – just as a farmer breaks down the obstacles in a water course so that water flows by its own nature"⁴⁴. Hence the transfer of soul from one species to another seems to be an accepted thesis in Indian religion.

A direct evidence of continuity of soul has come from people who had near death experiences (NDE)⁴⁵. NDE seems to happen when a person is declared clinically dead but after some time returns to life. Interestingly enough nearly all the descriptions of NDE are very similar and talk of getting out of the body and going through a dark tunnel and then

coming into brilliant white light. Depending upon the religion of the person one sees Christ, Krishna, Buddha or any chosen deity. For agnostics or atheists there is a feeling of tremendous warmth and happiness in the presence of white light.

Quite a number of people have also reported that during NDE their whole life flashes by and almost all their past actions become visible. Probably it is because the memory of their present birth is still fresh. Then somehow the self is told that his/her time to die has still not come and the person “wakes up” in the body, which is being resuscitated. Interestingly enough during this period there is no concept of time. In majority of cases tremendous change in attitude towards life and death takes place in people who experience NDE. They consider dying as a pleasurable experience and are not afraid of death anymore.

One of the most detailed treatises on death and dying is the Tibetan book of Living and Dying⁴⁶. Most of the traditions are based on Indian Yogic system though Tibetan Buddhists give them Chinese sounding names. In this book a good description is given of what happens to the soul after death and till it gets a new body. Tibetan Buddhist Lamas call this transition state as Bardo (Tibetan word for transition). They identify the bardos as:

1. Natural bardo of this life. This extends to a person’s lifetime.
2. Painful bardo of dying. This is the period, which lasts from the beginning of process of dying until the clinical death.
3. Luminous bardo of dharmata is the period after the death experience and is manifested by varied colors, sounds and light. This is similar to NDE.
4. Karmic bardo is the time interval, which lasts till the soul gets a new body. The Buddhists' believe in the Indian philosophical system that getting a new body is dependent on the karma (Sanskrit for action) of previous births. Similar beliefs exist in other religions. Hence one's actions or karma in this life seem to play a significant role in how one dies and in what form they are reborn.

Karma and Fear of Death

Karma is a Sanskrit word meaning action. However it embraces the whole meaning of living. Thus according to law of karma your actions or deeds (both good and bad) decide your future in this life or the next life. Law of karma occupies a central position in Indian philosophy. There are tomes written on it but here we will focus mostly on how it relates to death.

According to some commentators the law of karma is very deterministic. They claim that you are born according to your karma, things happen to you in your present birth because of your past karmas etc. Hence according to them because of past karmas one

cannot change the present life. This however negates the whole basis of Yoga which claims that one can change the *Sanskars* (memories) and hence ones life⁴⁷.

Each one of us is born with a unique genetic makeup, which provides a basic template for our general behavior. This behavior is further modified by the surroundings that one encounters in life. I therefore believe that each one of us has the power to change our destiny and our memories by our actions in this life. Our actions change the neural pathways in the brain and hence the mind which guides us to our future course of action.

As we saw in Chapter 1, each one of us can be thought of as an individual molecule moving “randomly” in the sea of humanity and according to the forces of opportunity acting on us. However as a whole we may produce a “dissipative structure” which is the evolution of mankind. Thus the evolution of mankind towards a greater spiritual and technological sophistication is the “chaotic attractor” towards which we are all attracted. **This evolution is quite certain and therefore deterministic (as we saw in chapter on Time) unlike our individual lives.** Thus on a bigger macroscopic scale the system may be deterministic and may have a destiny.

According to Indian Yogic system the time of death is governed by the karma of a living entity. When the karma’s course is finished then death takes place. It is not clear how to find out what constitutes karma, its duration or how many karmas a person accumulates during his/her lifetime. Patanjali Yoga Darshan simply states that *Sanyam* on his/her karma makes it possible for the Yogi to calculate the exact time of his death⁴⁸. This also suggests that a Yogi has no control over his death though he may know the time of exit. However there are many instances of great Yogis who have left their body by their own will and hence can certainly select the time of their departure^{31, 36}.

An interesting aspect of time of death was given by the great Indian mathematician S. Ramanujam who used to say that the death of a person takes place only at a certain space-time junction point. He never explained what that junction point was. Ramanujam who died in 1920 at the young age of 32 was one of the greatest mathematicians of the last century. He was basically a spiritualist and mathematics was a by-product of his spirituality. He said many times “an equation to me has no meaning unless it expresses a thought of God”⁴⁹. He had some clairvoyant powers and hence could predict events. He even predicted that he will die before the age of 35. Quite a number of his friends and relatives used to come to him for consultation about their future and quite a number of times he urged them to move away from their present living place so that the space-time junction point could be avoided.

The desire to know how and when death will take place is dictated by the fact that almost all the living entities are afraid of death. The first impulse on sensing impending danger is to

protect oneself and survival is the cornerstone of Darwinian evolutionary theory. The possible reasons for death fear could be:

1. The experience is very traumatic. It is accompanied by loss of identity and sometimes with tremendous physical pain.
2. The living being “instinctively” does not know what will happen to its “memory” or form; whether it will find a new body or will it be fixed in space for a long time. So there is a fear of unknown. All living entities are wired in such a way that they are afraid of losing their body and with it their form and identity. If a soul can exist without a body then we should not be afraid of death. However the form or body, which gives us the sense of ‘I’, is very afraid of losing its identity.
3. The process of learning or moving to a higher level of consciousness is disturbed and delayed. Thus 20-30 years or even more can be lost in the process.
4. The living entity loses its ability to change “memory”. This ability comes with the brain attached to the body and with death the body ceases to exist. In fact the proliferation of species in the initial stages of evolution is a direct consequence of the desire to have and keep the body. It allows the templates of memory from that species to continue. The basis for proliferation of species was discussed in detail in the Chapter on Time.

Blocking the Pain of Death

Since the soul clings to the body, the shedding of lifetime memories at the time of death is painful. That is the reason the Indian yogic system stresses the liberation of soul so that the painful cycle of birth and death is stopped.

Yogis also believe that reduction or elimination of pain would remove the fear of death. One of the major aims of yoga therefore is to make the body and mind powerful enough so that pain is either reduced or removed completely.

Why is there pain and what is its purpose? Pain and pleasure are complimentary and are part of life. They are the attributes of the body. The intense physical pain probably is an outcome of the body trying to repair itself and requires very intense brain concentration for it. All other sensory inputs or other thoughts are blocked by the pain sensation. This concentrated thought might help the brain to heal the body. This is also the mechanism where single pointed concentration helps in memory removal. Pain therefore could be one of the key mechanisms of removing or modifying memory. Any intense experience can do the same. For example intense pleasure of love for a chosen deity is the genesis of Bhakti Yoga (Yoga of devotion)⁴¹.

Interestingly, emotional and physical pain and their intensity are similar in nature and the brain does not differentiate between the two. Recent studies reveal that fMRI scans of

the subjects showed that the pain of rejection (emotional pain) and stubbing of big toe (physical pain) illuminated the same part of the brain⁵⁰. We also show this similarity intuitively in our vocabulary with terms like broken heart, heartache etc. Emotional pain allows the brain to intensely focus on resolving the conflicts and at the same time helps it to send and receive thought packets.

Advanced Yogis claim to have developed a mechanism of blocking pain from reaching the brain through Kundalini Yoga. Kundalini is a very ancient Indian Yoga system, whose practitioners believe that there is energy (could be cerebrospinal fluid) which is coiled like a female serpent (Kundalini is the Sanskrit word for a coiled female serpent) and lies at the base of spinal chord⁵¹. By Yogic process (mostly by willing it) it can be raised in the central canal of the spinal chord to reach its ultimate destination - the brain. Yogis claim that once it reaches the brain, liberation of a yogi from cycle of birth and death takes place. Raising it is done step by step and it takes many years before Yogis can raise it up to the brain. Yogis also claim that conservation of sexual energy helps tremendously in raising the Kundalini.

Kundalini Yoga helps to remove the sense organ inputs to the brain from various parts of the body. In medicine the pain blockers do the same. The main pain sensations from the body come through the spinal chord and probably raising of Kundalini means blocking the pain centers in the spinal chord progressively starting from the base of spine and reaching to the top of the brain. This effectively detaches the mind from sense organs. Shri Ramkrishna used to say that as he started raising his Kundalini, his body went through the process of locking itself starting from the base of his spinal chord so that he lost control of these parts as the Kundalini traveled from base of spine to the head⁵².

Yogis believe that with practice of Kundalini Yoga the mind gets completely detached from the body. This helps in developing memory or neural pathways so that at the time of death it is quite easy for the memory or soul to leave the body painlessly. Besides, they believe that with "pure soul" (without the sense organ memories attached to it) it is possible to achieve salvation from the cycle of birth and death. This is the central theme of Indian Yogic system. Patanjali says that once the gunas (result of karma) are resolved through Yoga then the soul becomes pure (without memory) and merges into Universal Consciousness⁵³.

Death and Memory Removal

So what happens at the time of death? It seems the ego sense 'I' or sense of identity has to shed the memory of attachments of sense organs. It is through the sense organs that we perceive the world and carry out our actions hence it is these organs which give the

sense of identity to a living entity. Shedding of these attachments allows the removal of major memory of lifetime. This includes almost all memories except the “basic memory” which is then transferred. We are still not sure what that basic memory could be.

The analogy from modern computers will be useful in explaining this concept. At the time of death there is a transfer of software (basic memory) from the body. In a computer a person transfers the software onto a new machine. In transfer of soul it is done on its own. There is no agent of transfer and hence it is guided by the forces it encounters just after death. Just like software is useless without the machine similarly the soul cannot do anything without the body (hardware). Body allows the soul to change its character just like one can modify the software through a computer machine. It is only through body that the brain receives all the sensory inputs and the body acts like an antenna for the mind. Thus the strongest desire of the soul is to get a body. This could be any body and hence there is a possibility of its transfer among species.

What happens to all the memories and information that a person learns during his/her lifetime after death?

1. Any knowledge produced is always in the knowledge space and it continues to increase. It is never reduced. All the information of activities we undertake whether good or bad goes into the knowledge space. This space is filled with knowledge from all over the Universe.
2. Information generation is an evolutionary process. There is a possibility that all the information we develop has a counterpart in the higher dimensional space. How it goes there is still not clear. Thus the old saying that all our actions may come to haunt us may mean that the information is never lost. It always remains in knowledge space.
3. The soul passing from one body to another carries the basic memory only. Once it gets into a new body it can access information from knowledge space. This makes more sense energywise since it will be difficult for the transfer of soul from one body to other if large amount of memory is attached to it.
4. The knowledge space is of two types. One that stays with earth or other livable planet. This includes the books, memories, other materials and the “atmosphere” of earth or planet. This space goes with the earth and earthlings can dip into it to get the knowledge so that the evolution of mankind takes place. The other knowledge space is the Universe and as the earth passes through it we produce quantum jumps in our knowledge. The knowledge in this space exists because of actions of advanced civilizations.

Passage of Memory or Soul

It is possible that at the time of death the basic memory or soul passes into the higher dimensional space. Death is the most traumatic experience for a living entity and

somehow allows the neurons to fire in a laser like fashion so that the soul can be transferred to the higher dimensional space. We have shown that the space here is rigid (Chapter 1) and hence allows the stability of soul. This space could be one step higher than our 4-dimensional one and could be the realm of spirits and possibly still affected by the forces present in our 4-dimensional world. The "memory" of Yogis and enlightened souls guided by their willpower and powerful minds, could however go into even higher dimensional space.

People who die suddenly for example because of a heart attack, accidents etc. may not get the time for the sense organ detachment. Thus the souls of such persons may retain the memory of body form for a little longer time which may result in the ghost form. We still do not know for how long the "ghost structure" can remain and what type of energy is required to maintain its stability. Those who die of natural causes get sufficient time for mind withdrawal or sense detachment of the soul and may follow the path of three bardos.

The ego sense 'I' or identity of a living entity comes from the body. It seems it is a summation of all its memories and includes the body form and structure. If the body is gone then this sense becomes rootless and without an anchor. Then this rudderless soul or memory is at the mercy of the forces, which exist in its vicinity. This memory, individual soul etc. is called *atman* in Indian traditional thought. It is quite possible that the *atman* or soul of an ordinary person, at the time of death, may contain substantial "memory" of body or form. These memories can only be shed or modified by the availability of a fresh body. This may make it possible for it to be born wherever it gets a body and thus the transfer of soul among species takes place.

However one is not sure if the transfer takes place in all life forms or those with a certain brain size. There could be a cutoff brain size below which the transformation from humans to other life forms may not take place.

In order to avoid this transfer into other species we need to cultivate our minds in such a manner that at the time of death we have a powerful structure of our thought so that most of the extraneous memories are shed and we create a great "Spiritual mass". Practice of yoga helps us in doing this. Creation of "Spiritual mass" is the only way to make sure that the transition of memory from one body to another human body is smooth and that it can also go to other planets by will. Passage of soul to other planets has been discussed in Chapter 1. It is possible that our ancient spiritual teachings about *swarglok* (heaven), etc. came because this planet was not a very hospitable place and hence the focus was to release the soul so that it could go to other hospitable planets from where we might have come.

As our technology advances we will be able to make our future world a very hospitable place so that the body could be made strong and healthy through Yoga or designer drugs. This will help to keep the mind and brain fit so that we could leave the body

at will. Thus in future most souls may be able to produce a high “Spiritual mass” at the time of their death so that they could either stay here on earth by will or could go out of the Earth's gravitational field. Some Yogis claim that there are great masters who came from other worlds, have chosen to live in this world for its upliftment, and are hundreds of years old⁵⁴.

The “Spiritual mass” can be produced when the brain is working at its fullest and capable of producing deep thought in higher dimensional space. This is what great Yogis can do and is the basis of whole Yoga. As we age our brain loses its suppleness and gets petrified. Hence it cannot fire all the 100 billion neurons in a laser like fashion at the time of death. This limits most people’s capability to get a new body by will. Some of the great spiritual leaders like Christ, Adi Shankaracharya, Sant Gyaneshwar of Maharashtra⁵⁵, Swami Vivekanand etc. left their bodies before they reached 40 years and when their brainpower was at its prime. For others who cannot produce the critical “spiritual mass”, rebirth is by chance or strongly willed by the loved ones.

Reincarnation

There are people who do not believe in life after death or reincarnation and hence believe that after death everything finishes with the body. However there is an irrefutable proof from a large number of cases where there has been a total recall of past lives and events by individuals (specially children) and these cases have been reported in all societies and in almost all religions⁵⁶. Hence we will take the data of these cases as experiential fact and assume that there is reincarnation and life after death.

So what happens in reincarnation? It seems that there is a transfer of memory or software from one body to another (the hardware). This memory contains the basic template of knowledge acquired in previous birth. Thus the memory of mundane things is left out. If this were also transferred then it would have overloaded the memory in the new body and allowed very little space for working memory. Probably this is the reason why most of us do not remember information from prior births.

The memory transfer is extremely efficient energywise since a new hardware (body) gets the basic memory (software) to work with. This is also the mechanism by which knowledge evolution takes place since the new body with its “old” basic memory or templates can gain knowledge much faster and helps in knowledge accumulation. This knowledge together with what is available in other forms (books, information via mass media etc.) allows us to move forward in our evolution. The continuous knowledge evolution is however given a quantum jump when some evolved souls are able to tune into the knowledge space (KS).

There have been many instances when rebirths have taken place in the same or nearby households brought about by a very strong will of the loved ones. The intense love creates a powerful force for the soul to be so reborn. However it is not clear when and where the birth will take place. In a celebrated case the Indian saint Shri Ramkrishna described in detail how he and a very highly evolved Yogi decided to be born together on earth. He identified that Yogi as Swami Vivekanand a great spiritual leader of India. However it took 20 years for Shri Ramkrishna to find out about Vivekanand although he was born within 20 kms of where Ramkrishna was staying! Besides Vivekanand was born 40 years after Ramkrishna and the two met each other by chance in Calcutta⁵⁷.

One of the major aims of all lifeforms is to get a human body. Getting it is extremely important in evolution of knowledge since our huge brain allows us to tune into the knowledge space. Bodies belonging to other species cannot do it because of their small brain size. If the soul goes into other life forms then the knowledge accumulation is a retrograde step.

Basis of a Good Life

How does one lead his/her life so that it is happy and death is painless and is welcomed more like a friend when it comes? Tomes have been written on this subject and the great masters of this world like Christ, Buddha, Patanjali and others have spoken about it from their direct experience. It will be therefore arrogant on my part to say anything more than what they have already said. However we can try to understand it from the perspective of our theory on deep thought.

The whole basis of life is to have continuous happiness and joy and that is possible with a very healthy body in a very hospitable world. The self can only enjoy and be happy with a body (preferably a human body) since it provides anchor to it and allows the making and breaking of memories.

One of the keys to happiness is reduction and complete removal of greed. Greed creates tremendous conflicts and all round unhappiness. Removal of greed can be achieved by cultivating a nimble brain via *Sanyam*. A healthy body can help in creating a nimble brain. The nimble brain has a tremendous processing power and hence a small amount of data is processed very efficiently to gain useful information. This helps the mind to "get satisfied" easily and helps in satiating the desire so that the person can move on. This is the major step in greed reduction.

Sanyam also allows enough working memory space in the brain so that majority of 100 billion neurons are available to focus on a single thought. This can become possible when we have less memory locked up in the brain about mundane and routine worldly

activities and attachments. Also there should be an excellent conflict resolution mechanism developed internally. Deep down we should honestly evaluate our actions and should be able to live with them in peace. This act can help in freeing the mind from psychological knots, which can take up a major portion of the memory. Removal of these knots may help make the mind calm and fit for deep thought. The final word on this subject therefore belongs to Patanjali who says, "Undisturbed calmness of mind is attained by cultivating friendliness towards the happy, compassion for the unhappy, delight in the virtuous and indifference towards the wicked"⁵⁸.

Making this world a better and more hospitable place can also help in calmness of mind and internal happiness. This will help us fulfill both our physical and emotional needs and can help all humans to live a very full and happy life. For most of us this planet is the only home we have. This means that besides our personal evolution we should also contribute as much as possible to mankind's evolution. In this, technology will play a very major role. It allows us to take care of our physical needs and with its progress and evolution will allow us to live in a sustainable manner. Thus to my mind the contribution of Edisons, Fords, Einsteins and Newtons of this world towards mankind's evolution are at par with those of spiritual leaders like Buddha, Christ, Patanjali, etc.

Mankind has always aspired to immortality. Thus by means of chemicals, drugs and spiritual methods humans have always striven to prolong their lives. Yogis and practitioners of healthy body cult claim that human body can theoretically live for 125 years. There are some Yogis in India who claim that some masters have lived even for 300-400 years!⁵⁴ I believe that once our technology becomes very advanced then it will be possible for humans to have a long life. Whether that long life will be productive, happy and emotionally satisfying will depend a lot on how hospitable we make this planet earth. I believe a combination of spirituality and technology can provide a basis for achieving this goal (Chapter 13).

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