

Christopher D. Wallis

What is Death?

An Introduction to Eastern spiritual teachings on leaving your body,
written especially for the very young or the very old

To answer the question ‘what is death?’ I’ll have to start by explaining what a living being is (I’ll speak in the context of the Indian religious traditions, with elements of the Tibetan tradition as well). As a living, embodied being, you consist of a variety of different parts. You have a body and a brain, you have a mind, a subconscious mind, an ego, and a soul. These different faculties are organized into different ‘structures’ which we can describe using the model of the four bodies.

First, you have a physical body. That fact, and its consequences, are fairly obvious. You occupy your physical body when you’re awake.

Second, you have what is called a subtle body. This is a body of energy and vibration. It is affected by sound. This subtle body houses your ‘psychic bundle’, which are your mental faculties of mind, subconscious mind, and ego. These faculties also are responsible for emotional states. The division into several different mental/emotional faculties accounts for the fact that sometimes one part of you wants one thing, while another part of you wants another thing. Through contemplation and meditation, you can develop your subconscious mind, finely honing it until it becomes a ‘higher’ or spiritual mind. Your intuition comes from your subconscious mind, so it is necessary to develop it in order to have accurate intuition.

The subtle body also regulates the flow of vital energy throughout your body, and when that energy flow is blocked in some way, it results in a ‘psychosomatic’ ailment (one where doctors usually can’t find a physical cause, or where the apparent physical cause is not enough to explain the illness). Since the mind is a part of the subtle body, mental health is intimately connected with the efficient flow of energy in the subtle body. When the subtle body is sick, we often call it ‘stress’.

Your consciousness withdraws from your physical body and occupies your subtle body when you are dreaming. This explains the radical shift in awareness and perception you experience in dreams. Sometimes you can occupy your subtle body while you're awake. When that happens, you completely lose track of the world around you, caught up in 'day-dreaming' or abstract contemplation.

Third, you have a causal body. Each body is smaller than the previous one, and contained within it — like those hollow wooden Russian dolls, one inside the other, smaller and smaller (except there's only four here). The causal body contains traces of deep-seated tendencies or patterns that influence your life in a patterned fashion. These tendencies are created by your actions in this life (which form habits) as well as your actions in previous lives. We'll come back to that idea later, but suffice it to say that your very subtle patterns of behaviour, the types of recurring things that happen to you, and your deep-seated personality traits — these things that have been present your whole life are caused by the blueprint engraved on your causal body. This blueprint shaped your subtle body when you were born, and gave it its form, just like your DNA gave your physical body its form. Thus your subtle body in turn influenced the kind of life, personality, and challenges you have.¹

Fourth, you have a supracausal body. This isn't really a body at all if we define a 'body' as an encasement for our selves. The supracausal body *is* your self, it is your true being, your soul, your essential core. It is the part of you that is eternal and unchanging. It is the divine centre of your being, beyond cause. It is supremely transcendent, in that it is within everything but beyond everything; it is not dependent on anything else but itself. It is not separate from God. In India, it is called the Atman. It is more accurate to say that the universe came from it than to say it came from the universe. It is uncreated and indestructible. It is the most *you* part of you, and it is the same for everyone (otherwise, we would not be one people).

So now that you know what you are, according one aspect of the Asian religious tradition, I can talk about the process that we call death. Here I will incorporate some

¹ This theory of the samskaric DNA/blueprint on the causal body draws on conversations with Dr Douglas Brooks.

information from Tibetan Buddhism as well, specifically a book called the *Bardo Thödol*, or *The Book of Natural Liberation through Understanding in the Between* (it is popularly known as ‘The Tibetan Book of the Dead’).

One thing all the Asian religious traditions agree on is that death is not an end. It is merely a change. Your consciousness will continue, just in a different form. Only your body will die. Many many great Asian philosophers have explored this subject; they have gone deep into meditation, and charted the ‘inner reaches’ of their own being and awareness. They have thought very deeply about how the world works and how to explain it, and they all believe that death cannot be an end. It is simply not how the world works. This existence of ours is characterized by cycles of being: the seasons, the phases of the moon, the falling and rising of the planet’s water as rain and vapour, the salmon run, the birds’ migration, and so on. Everything always returns to where it started eventually. Everything in its own way is born, grows, matures, decays, dies and is reborn once again. Why should humans be any different? The ancient Indian scriptures called the *Upanishads* present us with the revelation of the consistent character of this universe. They say ‘as above, so below; as within, so without; as here, so elsewhere.’ So you see, when you die, you (like everything else in this universe) will be reborn anew, in a different form.

Buddhism says that your construction of a sense of permanent identity is actually false. You feel like you are the same person now as you were twenty years ago, but on another level you know that is not true. You change every day, and you will continue to change. You are as different from your self of twenty years ago as you are from another human being. Your ego-identity is impermanent. In this sense, you die and are reborn every day. Death is no different from these daily changes we all experience. It’s just another change. To understand this, you must let go of the security of the false notion of permanence and realise that the nature of reality is one of constant change. We can be happy in that knowledge, and the opportunity for self-improvement it brings.

When the moment of death finally comes (and it was set and predetermined at the moment of your birth — time is circular, not linear), your consciousness begins slowly withdrawing from the physical body, moving towards the centre of your being. The vital energy that circulates through the body withdraws first from the extremities, which become lifeless. Your consciousness also withdraws from the senses, so you are no longer able to see or hear.

[Remember! This is not a morbid preoccupation. Death is not a tragedy in this cosmology. It is just a moving on, a transition like any other. It is an exciting, even a joyful thing, to see what lies beyond for you! Many blessings and opportunities for bliss and happiness accompany this process.]

Your consciousness pools in the centre of your being. It is now almost totally withdrawn from the body. The body's heart stops beating, and the electrical energy in the brain ceases. Those around you in the physical world believe that you are dead. However, some vital energy still circulates in your central channel, in the region of your spine. You could still re-animate your body at this point and 'come back to life'. You don't want or need to come back, but this explains why some people who had to come back could.

This is the moment of physical death. This is your first opportunity as well. Focus your mind on God. Do not give in to fear. Whatever you focus your mind on in your final moments in the body, that is the destination your consciousness will be directed toward when it leaves the body. So let go of your desires. Think only of God, or Jesus, or whatever divine thought is easiest to hold.

Not only does your physical body die at this point, but your subtle body dissolves as well. Your soul, encased in the thin and tiny causal body (with the blueprint of your past experience), exits your physical body through an opening such as an eye or the mouth. You now realise that you are not your body at all, and you feel free and unbounded like you never have before. Nothing holds you back! You see your family crying and grieving, and you want to say to them, 'Why are you crying? I'm here! I'm free!' Perhaps one or two of them feel your presence, and they are comforted by the familiar energy of your love. Then you must move on. Before you know it (unless you

really need to linger in the physical world to help someone) you have slipped into another place, another realm of being.

You find yourself rocketing down a tunnel at the speed of light. Everything that made you feel like a finite being before is slipping away. Your memories of who you were in your life are slowly dissolving, which is okay, because that identity was not really you anyway. Reaching the end of the tunnel, you explode out into an ocean of light.

There is light all around you. It is within you as well. Everywhere there is nothing but light. It is like the light of a million suns. It is dazzling, unbearably bright, but you cannot get away from it. There is nowhere to go. There is no more existence other than this ocean of light. If you have prepared for this moment, you will stay conscious in that light. Otherwise, you may fall into a sleep-like state.

Realise that that light is the light of universal consciousness. It is the light of God. If you are not afraid, you will be able to experience it as infinite love and bliss. Most importantly of all, realise that it is you. It is who you are. There is no separation at all. Can you find where you end and the light begins? You cannot. If you realise that that light is your own consciousness, then you will blissfully merge into God's heart and stay there. If you do not realise that, then after about four days, you will leave that light and move on to a new place, with new opportunities for realising the truth. God has more tricks up his sleeve!

In the next place, you will have visions of divine beings. If you're a Christian, you will probably see Jesus, Mary, and great saints like St. Francis of Assisi or St. Theresa of Avila. You may see angels, cherubim, and seraphim. A Muslim could see Mohammed at this stage, and a Hindu might see Krishna. You see, a divine power is present, but the form that it takes is dependent on your own conception of divinity. In a sense, whatever you see in this stage is actually a projection of your own consciousness. But that doesn't make it any less real! Your consciousness itself is divine, and has the power to create and dissolve realities, or to impose its own structure on existing patternless energy.

The divine beings that you see here are not as easy to embrace as you might think. They appear in such glory, radiating such light, they are so pure that you can hardly bear to look at them. Their forms are so awesome that they frighten you. Nevertheless, if you can realise that they are really you, you can attain that experience of divinity. Look at the Buddha, or your Guru, or Jesus and realise that you are him and he is you, and you will joyfully play in his embrace forever. Unfortunately, it's not easy, because off to the side you see lights glowing which tempt you into one of the worlds of desire, such as heaven, hell, or earth. Realise that 'heaven' here is a very pleasurable place where all your desires are fulfilled, but it is not divine. The only true heaven is merging with God, desirelessly. But because you have desires, your habitual patterns tempt you toward heaven or earth. If you feel like you are not strong enough to face the blinding light and enter the embrace of the divine beings, then instead move towards the soft white light of heaven or the soft blue light of earth. Avoid the other coloured lights, such as yellow, green, or grey! They lead to hellish realms!

If you do not take any of these paths, but continue to wander confused, you will eventually encounter extremely frightening forms, like demons, who may attack you. You are not in hell — these are just other forms of your own consciousness, trying to scare you into realising the truth. Even now, if you recognise them as projections from your own mind, you can still attain divinity. Otherwise, you travel a rocky road for a while longer. You can be in this limbo dimension after death for up to a total of 49 days.

Ultimately, if you do not merge with the Infinity of God, you will take another birth. You must do so, because you still have lessons to learn. You will keep learning until finally you do enter completely into the heart of God. In the meantime, your past actions impel you to be reborn. This is a simple natural law of cause and effect. Every action must have an equal reaction. Therefore, actions (causes) in this life must bear fruit in another life, because the law of cause and effect is inviolate (except when you merge with God).

Now you will choose your new parents, so that you can be born into a situation that will help you learn the lessons you never fully mastered before. You know what's

best for you, and that includes suffering as well as happiness: we learn from both. You have a vision of your parents in love, and you feel drawn to them as a good match. Your soul enters into the top of the foetus' head in your mother's womb, through the hole in the skull, and lodges there. You sink into the oblivion of warm, soft, darkness. The brain in your new body is undeveloped and cannot support complex conscious thoughts. You will not consciously remember any of this when you are born, though you will intuitively sense the truth for several years, until you start to think of yourself as a separate individual, different from everyone else. Then you really will forget. But perhaps this life you will learn all your lessons, and you will not have to return again.

I have just outlined one perspective on the process of death in the context of Asian religion, drawing on elements of Hinduism, Tibetan Buddhism, and a dash of 'neo-Hinduism'. The next question is, how does this knowledge help us to live a different life? How does it prepare us for death?

Dying is a great thing. It is an opportunity to remake yourself anew, to rise like a phoenix from the flames. Whenever a profound revelation or a profound trauma occurs in our lives, a part of us dies and is reborn. Death is a transformation: no more, no less. With each transformation, we have an opportunity to remake ourselves as purer, nobler, more meaningful expressions of divine consciousness. Physical death is the ultimate opportunity. How do we prepare for it?

One way is to form new habitual behaviours. We fall back on our most familiar modes of being in times of fear and stress; so why not make sure those modes are positive? The more the mind focuses on the highest during life, the easier it will be to overcome the fear and desire at the moment of death, and focus on God instead. Therefore, we must condition the mind. We must train the mind. You can let each passing moment be a preparation for that final confrontation by using it for service to the highest goal you can think of.

The Asian tradition posits an additional kind of death which can take place before the death of the physical body. Through practices such as meditation, a radical

shift in consciousness can take place that causes the death of the ego before the death of the physical body. This is called 'liberation', 'self-realization', or 'enlightenment'. With the death of the ego, the consciousness of the soul stops its false identification with its limited embodied form, and identifies itself with the ocean of cosmic consciousness (God). Such a person is no longer a limited, finite being. They have become a perfect saint while still in the body. For such a one, when the body dies, the soul automatically and instantly dissolves into cosmic consciousness, for indeed it has already done so. The death of the physical body in this case is merely the dissolution of apparent barriers, so no longer can any distinctions be drawn.

What is death? For the Asian traditions, death is rebirth. Therefore it is of the utmost importance to contemplate death, and do what you can to positively influence the nature of your rebirth. Death is the ultimate transformative experience. You have so many voluntary opportunities in life for transformation; the final transformation is involuntary. Eventually, after death after death after death, you realise you had better play this game, 'cause it's the only game in town.

Thanks for listening.