

LESSON 3

LIFE AFTER DEATH

One thing found especially helpful to many persons who study Theosophy is that it lessens or even removes the fear of that transition from earth life to the life beyond, commonly called death . Where before they dreaded it, or pushed it from their minds, they begin to see it as an inevitable adventure for everyone, an adventure for which they can prepare as intelligently as they would for a journey to another country, informing themselves of conditions and taking the necessary steps to meet them.

It may be questioned by some whether it is really possible to learn what happens after physical death takes place, or even whether anything at all happens in the sense of continuing experience. However, since the theosophical concept of man is that of an immortal pilgrim with a future inconceivably longer than the one earth life of which he may be aware at any time, considerable care has been taken to assemble evidence for the continuity of consciousness. This is offered for consideration, without dogmatic pronouncement that it is the final truth on the subject. There is no doubt at all that in the future decades scientific investigations in this area will reveal many factors now overlooked. Further, since each individual is unique here in this objective world, it is logical to assume that the after-death life also has unique aspects for each, although the general pattern is similar as it is here “on earth.” It is a subjective life and is said to be largely determined in character by the individual’s own attitudes, thoughts, and actions, and the level of consciousness to which he has attained during the incarnation just completed.

More in the nature of subjective than of objective evidence perhaps is the widespread intuition or instinctive belief in the immortality of the soul. This has persisted throughout the ages, in spite of the doubts and fears that assail almost everyone at some time during his life. It seems too deep and universal to be based merely on an ephemeral wish or hope; it is as basic to man’s nature as his longing for and ability to live. It may very well be the manner in which the memory of many repetitions of the experience comes through the new physical brain into the psyche of the individual. As a matter of fact, small children frequently appear to remember phases of past transitions, for it is not unusual to hear a child say, “When I was in heaven...” or something of this nature. The child is still close to the immediate nature of experience, a quality not yet smothered in the layers of skepticism which develop as he grows older. There is also the universal teaching of the founders of the great religions concerning the existence of a future life. Then we have the accumulated evidence of psychical research, not overlooking the fact that some of the researchers are also physical scientists. Some eminent psychologists are willing to entertain the

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consciousness beyond physical death; and experiments in E.S.P. in this area, while still conclusive because of the subjective nature of the evidence, point strongly in the direction of the continuity of life. Outstanding clairvoyants both among members and non-members of The Theosophical Society have recorded their descriptions of what they have learned through their ability to see what takes place at death and how the bodies are affected. Lastly, Theosophy suggests the evidence of reason. The operation of natural laws such as the conservation of energy and evolution suggests that the experiences of man are not wasted, that spiritual evolution is as necessary as physical evolution. Life is ongoing and dynamic; this is apparent to anyone with the most rudimentary powers of observation. It has pursued its evolution through all the lower kingdoms of nature without ceasing to be life; it is hardly logical to assume that, once it has reached the stage of individualization and self-consciousness in the human kingdom, the individuality should perish with the destruction of the forms through which it has expressed itself. As Manly Hall has expressed it in one of his illuminating articles, "If, as the theologian insists, there is a divine spark in every human creature, then this spark is itself timeless and indestructible and there is no reason to assume that God in Nature lives forever but God in man is forever dying."

Theosophy therefore postulates that the real man is no more dead after he leaves his physical body than he was before; rather, that after a time, he is more radiantly alive than ever because he loses his identification with and dependence on dense physical matter. He has merely ceased to use his vehicle of expression on the physical plane. It is as though the wires of communication had been cut, leaving the "receiver" dead, although what had formerly been speaking through that receiver is as alive as ever. Nor -- say those who have investigated what takes place -- is the man any different in knowledge or character from what he was before the "wires" were cut. He faces again an age-old adventure, differing only in detail because of what he has built into his consciousness during his last incarnation.

According to the descriptions of clairvoyant observers, as a person approaches the point of death, the etheric double, which transmits vitality to the dense physical body, gradually withdraws, carrying with it the life force and the higher bodies. The slender magnetic thread -- the "silver cord" -- is finally all that holds it to the dying body. Then, in the last moments of consciousness, growing less and less vivid as the life withdraws, the events of the incarnation which is ending pass swiftly in review -- a fact well attested by persons rescued from drowning or who have been near death in other ways and have been brought back to consciousness. Finally, at the moment of death, the magnetic cord of etheric matter is broken, and the man, wrapped in the violet-gray etheric double, appears to float for a time above the dense physical body in a state of peaceful unconsciousness. A beautiful description of this moment has been

given by
Longfello
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Slave's
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which concludes with the lines:

For death had illumined the land of sleep,
And his lifeless body lay,
A worn-out fetter that the soul
Had broken and thrown away.

It is suggested that the process of dying is not greatly different from that of going to sleep, except that in sleep the etheric double remains attached to the dense body, supplying it with vitality, while at death the etheric double is withdrawn and the magnetic connection broken. It is said that anyone present at this solemn moment of withdrawal can be of great help to the one making the transition by remaining quiet and calm and without emotional resistance to what is taking place.

After some time, varying somewhat but usually lasting for a number of hours, the ego or soul disengages itself from the etheric double and thus releases itself entirely from physical bondage. The etheric double then “dies” also and gradually disintegrates, while the man remains in the astral or emotional body. This is another way of saying that the emotions outlive the physical body.

As pointed out in previous lesson, the emotions exist in a world more tenuous than any state of ordinarily visible matter, a field of existence with its own degrees of vibrations, from the very fine to the very coarse, and the individual is attracted to that level most characteristic of his emotional nature during earth life. The emotional body has a kind of vague elemental consciousness which feels the change when the separation of the etheric double takes place, and in order to protect itself and resist disintegration as long as possible, it begins immediately to rearrange its tenuous matter so that the denser, coarser vibrations form the outermost shell. Here, for a time, the man might be said to be imprisoned, receiving only such influences as can reach him through this surface layer. Gradually, however, this disintegrates, and the consciousness is able to become active in and be aware of finer and higher levels of the astral world.

A person who has lived a depraved life, yielding to his basest desires, is said to go through a period of suffering after the loss of his physical body. There is no physical pain, of course, but the suffering may be intense because he must contend with desires for which there is no fulfillment, the vehicle of such satisfaction no longer existing for him. This is comparable to purgatory, or the after-death purgation period described in some religious systems. Obviously, it may even seem to the individual that he is in hell, but the condition is not at all in the nature of punishment; it is merely the inevitable result of natural law, the working out of causes set in motion in the physical world. An individual of

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none of this intense emotional stress because even the densest and coarsest portions of his astral body contain no matter which vibrates at these frequencies. He is said to dwell in a protected sleep until the higher levels of the astral world are reached, when he awakes to find life very similar to that which he has left.

But the astral world is not eternal. Every man, however basely he may have lived, is eventually cleansed of his emotional desires, the denser layers wear away, and he finds himself in more favorable and pleasant surroundings.

It has been mentioned that each of the seven concentric planes, or fields, of a solar system is said to have seven sub-planes and, according to descriptions by clairvoyants, the higher sub-planes of the astral world are very much like the pleasanter aspects of earth life, although of course less material. By the time the ego reaches there, the emotions have been refined and the thought forms are therefore purer; indeed, at this level, there is no matter which can respond to coarse desires or impure thoughts. There is an important difference from the earth life, however. Thoughts are now visible, and deception is impossible for one in a physical body to comprehend. The astral world has been called the "unobstructed universe" where matter is so responsive that to think of a thing is immediately to construct it, although it may dissolve the moment the thought is gone.

The dead are said to communicate readily with the living while the latter are asleep, but during waking hours they cannot usually attract the attention of those whose consciousness is still centered in the physical world. Loving thoughts from living friends and prayers for the dead, if not accompanied by feelings of depression, are often a source of help and pleasure to those who have recently passed into the astral plane. Excessive grief on the part of those left behind, however, subject them to much discomfort and may even hinder their proper progress for a time.

But just as when we move from one city to another we gradually find new and congenial companionship, so those we love who have gone on find themselves amid new surroundings, with occupations and companionships helpful to their growth. It is a reasonable assumption that the amount of time spent at any level of the emotional world will depend on the time spent in similar activities during residence in the body. The habits cultivated, the disciplines exercised, the emotions built into one's very being, are the materials of which the astral experience consists. Thus it can be said that each creates his own heaven or hell.

Finally, however, the astral body too disintegrates. As years pass, the dead are more and more remote from bondage to their physical experience, yet every

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man and only the gross impurities have disintegrated. It is generally believed from many accounts of this state given by clairvoyants, that from 20 to 40 years is the average stay in the astral field of energies and that, when released from it, the ego again experiences a sense of freedom, even greater than that he knew when released from the physical body. This has been compared with the entrance to the heaven life described in many religions.

The special characteristic of the heaven world, which exists on the four lower sub-planes of the mental plane, is said to be an intensity of bliss. This is a world in which evil and sorrow are impossible, for these have been worked out and left behind in the physical and astral worlds. It is also a world in which the power of response to the individual's aspirations is limited only by his own capacity to aspire. It is not really a place but a state of consciousness where energies have been stepped up to an immensely higher level of a nature which demands a new type of contact. Long freed of the necessity for hearing, seeing, and feeling by separate organs on the physical plane, he now does not even need the extended capacities of the astral plane. Instead, he feels within himself a power which enables him to grasp every situation in its entirety. To think of a place is to be there; to think of a beloved friend is to be with him. Misunderstandings are impossible. He is in the midst of a world of ever-changing light and color and sound, in a happiness indescribable, seemingly surrounded by his loved ones and capable of realization of his greatest aspirations. "Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither hath it entered into the heart of man"¹ to conceive the glories of the heaven world.

It is in this world, this state of consciousness, that the ego assimilates and works up into faculties the experiences of his earth life just past. He can, of course, use only the amount of experience which he has gathered, and he cannot initiate new lines of activity, but the more friends he has, the more altruistic his devotion, the nobler his character, the longer he will need to stay in the heaven world in order to assimilate the right harvest of his earth's sowing. And, of course, the more beautiful and blissful will be this phase of his existence. The Bhagavad Gita says: "Those who worship the ancestors go to the ancestors; those who worship the gods go to the gods."

Whatever the length of time spent in this world, it is appropriate to the needs of the individual. Then the wave of life sweeps him on to the three higher sub-planes or levels of the mental world, where all the faculties gained are incorporated into the causal body. The true man, or ego, having made the round of an incarnation, has come home and dwells for a time on his own level. For the majority of individuals, this is but a short period in a rather dreamy

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¹ Corinthians 2:9

development, the ego or soul itself realizes the purport of the lessons learned and stores away the residue of good for future use in the form of conscience and ideals.

To refer once more to the term “fields” explained briefly in Lesson 2 in connection with the etheric, astral, and lower mental worlds, attention may be called here to the fact that in this hypothesis, the three higher levels of the mental world, the home of the causal body, are spoken of as the “conceptual” field. As man exists in the physical or gravitational field, experiences in the psychodynamic field, he lives in the conceptual field: it is his true home. It is the realm of meaningfulness, of meaning-in-itself, as the gravitational field is the realm of mass and the psychodynamic field is the realm of constant, unceasing radiance and motion. The conceptual field is the domain of impersonal power, as the psychodynamic field is the domain of personal power. When man is fully conscious at this level, as he will be at some time in his evolution, he will have absolute mastery of his own purposes and the ability immediately to make the most meaningful use of every experience which comes to him. The conceptual field is the realm of archetypes in the Platonic sense, the home of the good, the true, the beautiful.

Spiritual potencies are at a still higher level and impress themselves on the conceptual field, as influences from the latter impress themselves on the psychodynamic field. This (the spiritual) is a field about which we may conjecture but about which little is actually known at this stage of our evolution. We may theorize that “eternality” is its characteristic, as mass, motion, and meaningfulness are the characteristics of the three “lower” fields mentioned, but while we may have rare and fleeting intimations of the nature of this eternality, we are unable at present to comprehend it in its fullness. This field, however, is an essential part of the whole hypothesis, since spiritual power is an undeniable reality and must have a source. It is assumed to be the field in which the monad, as such, dwells, committed to and, through its extension, the ego, involved in the aeonic pilgrimage of evolution. It is said that when this pilgrimage is completed and the human task is fulfilled, the causal body itself dissolves, and the ego with those elements of the personality which it has made eternal, is re-absorbed into the monad for further ventures at superhuman levels quite inconceivable to us.

To return to our discussion of the cycle of life and death. After a stay in the causal body, shorter or longer as the case may be, the ego grows hungry for more experience. At this time, it is said to have a transient vision of what the lessons of the next incarnation are to be, and is then carried by the rhythmic life-urge into the process of accumulating a new set of bodies for the coming incarnation. Only by the soul’s own desire and need for more experience on the lower planes, and the consequent potential for further development, is it brought back again into the round of birth and death. This is repeated again

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attainment through the process are exhausted and the soul stands at the threshold of divinity.

References for Supplementary Reading:

The Transition Called Death, Charles Hampton

Through Death to Rebirth, James S. Perkins

The Mirror of Life and Death, Laurence J. Bendit

Life After Death, C.W. Leadbeater

The Journey with Death, Rohit Mehta

Basic Theosophy, Geoffrey Hodson, Chapter 7

The Key to Theosophy, H.P. Blavatsky (edited by Joy Mills, Section 7 & 9)
(Quest abridgement.)

QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

1. Compare the usual ideas about death, as held by many people, with the theosophical ideas given in this lesson.
2. List the reasons and evidence for belief in life after death that have the strongest appeal to your own inner feelings. Discuss the phrase “continuation of individual consciousness” as you have understood it.
3. Describe the theosophical understanding of the process of dying, and the condition of the ordinary person immediately after death.
4. How does the astral or emotional body rearrange itself after death.
5. How does Theosophy explain each person’s responsibility for his own condition after death?
6. How does Theosophy relate the level of a man’s emotional life to his immediate experiences on the astral plane with its various sub-planes, after death?
7. What should be the attitude of mind and emotions on the part of the living toward the so-called dead?
8. What determines the length of stay (a) in the astral world, and (b) in the heaven world?
9. What is the purpose of the heaven life?
10. What follows the heaven life?