

Death and Dying

The Hindu View of the Grand Departure and Its Sacred Rites of Passage



**Specially Prepared for the Kauai Hospice Team's
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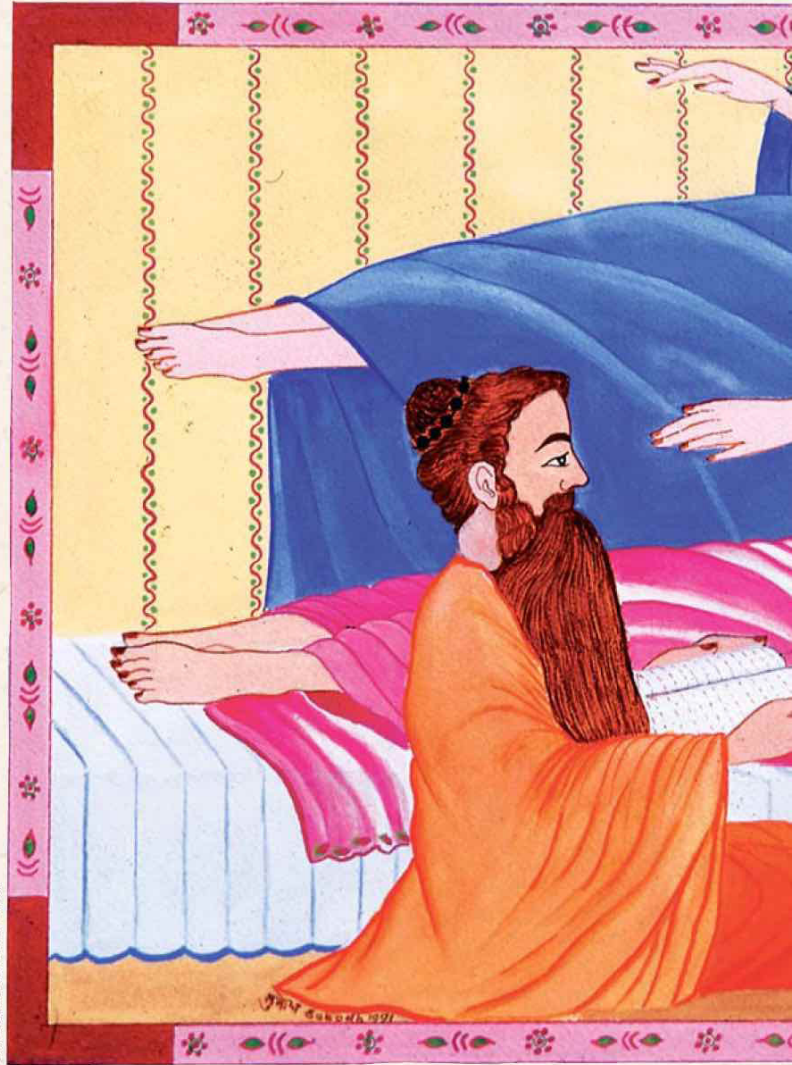
The Hindu View of the Grand Departure and Its Sacred Rites of Passage

LEAD ME FROM DARKNESS TO LIGHT, FROM DEATH to immortality." This famed Vedic prayer proclaims the human urge to survive, to conquer death and to know the joys of illuminated consciousness. People often pilgrimage to an isolated place in expectation of a vision, be it a jungle of fauna and foliage or cement and glass. Every person is on a vision quest. But for all souls, at the time of the great departure, *mahaprasthanā*, a vision comes as a tunnel of light at the end of which are beings of divine nature.

Many, having had a near-death experience, have sworn their testimony of such transforming encounters. An American woman who "died" during childbirth, but was brought back to life by quick medical action, recounted: "It was an incredible energy—a light you wouldn't believe. I almost floated in it. It was feeding my consciousness feelings of unconditional love, complete safety and complete, total perfection. And then, and then, a piece of knowledge came in—it was that I was immortal, indestructible. I cannot be hurt, cannot be lost, and that the world is perfect." Hundreds of people report similar experiences, affirming what Hinduism has always taught—that death is a blissful, light-filled transition from one state to another, as simple and natural as changing clothes, far from the morbid, even hellish alternatives some dread. A Vedic funeral hymn intones: "Where eternal luster glows, the realm in which the light divine is set, place me, Purifier, in that deathless, imperishable world. Make me immortal in that realm where movement is accordant to wish, in the third region, the third heaven of heavens, where the worlds are resplendent" (*Rig Veda, Aitareya Aranyaka* 6-11).

Most often, before our own death, we encounter its reality in the passing of friends or family. Our thoughts during the rites, termed *antyeshti* samskara in Sanskrit, turn to God. We witness the end of another's life and ask, "What am I going to do with the remaining years of my own life?" All that is said during these times reminds us that life on earth is temporary. All our possessions, power, ego and learning will end. Seeing this truth we turn the mind toward God, toward life's ultimate goal, moksha, liberation, and toward the path of dharma that will take us there. We do this not in trepidation, but in assurance, faith and gratitude for the opportunity to progress spiritually in this physical incarnation.

Death is defined differently according to what people believe themselves to be. If they are only the body and brain (as with humanists or atheists), then death is the end of sensory experience, of self. If we live once, death ends our only sojourn on Earth and is naturally dreaded. If we are born again and again, it loses its dread in light of the soul's pilgrimage to eternity. No matter how ill, how infirm our condition, there is a serene and consoling center of our being to which we can adjourn, the Source within. It is more us than our body, more us than our mind and emotion. It will not die. It does not hurt or fear. As physical debility and death draw near, we seek this center, whether we call it Paramatma, God, Self or Divine Consciousness. In the *Krishna Yajur Veda, Katha Upanishad*, Yama, Lord of Death, explains: "Death is a mere illusion



SUBODH MAHESWARAI

which appears to those who cannot grasp Absolute Reality. The soul is immortal, self-existent, self-luminous and never dies."

It is the soul's subtle body, *linga sharira*, that stores the "thought-energy" experiential impressions of life, called samskaras. When the body dies, this nonphysical sheath continues as a constellation of subtle elements—dispositions, memories, desires, etc. It is within this subtle body that the soul, if needed, reincarnates, as described in the *Shukla Yajur Veda, Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* (4.4.5-6): "A man acts according to the desires to which he clings. After death he goes to the next world bearing in his mind the subtle impressions of his deeds; and after reaping there the harvest of his deeds, he returns again to this world of action. Thus, he who has desires continues subject to rebirth." Death, according to

Hinduism, is not the contradiction of life. Death and birth are two sides of life's cosmic cycle. The culmination of that cycle is liberation. As the venerable Satguru Yogaswami of Sri Lanka taught: "By getting rid of desire, man can put an end to birth altogether."

Resolving Karmas: Many who have had a near-death experience speak of having come back to complete unfinished obligations to children, parents or friends. It is a great blessing to know of one's impending transition. A Hindu approaching death works diligently to finish all his "business" of this lifetime, the allotted portion of his total karma carried into this birth to face and resolve. If death

Grand departure: A soul detaches from the body (dressed in red) at the time of death in its subtle body (draped in blue). Keeping vigil, a swami reads from Hindu scripture.



comes while loose ends remain (misunderstandings unresolved, misdeeds unatoned for or obligations unfulfilled), another lifetime may be required to expire that karma. Thus, an aging or ailing Hindu will be seen going around to friends and enemies, giving love, help and blessings, working to resolve conflicts and differences, offering apologies and fulfilling all known obligations. Ideally, he executes his own will, distributing his properties and duties to heirs, charities and endowments, not leaving such tasks to others.

That done, he turns to God, reads scriptures, attends temple and amplifies meditation and devotion. He may pilgrimage to sacred spots or retire to a secluded place to practice *japa* and *yoga sadhanas*. The family takes care not to disturb these efforts, nor his retirement from social obligation or interaction, realizing he

has entered life's final stage, that of the renunciate, or *sannyasin*.

Making the Transition Consciously: Knowing that a conscious death is the ideal, the Hindu avoids excessive drugs or mind-numbing medical measures. He cultivates detachment as death approaches, knowing that loss is not suffered when something is given up voluntarily, only when it is taken from us by force. He is grateful for life, but not angry with or fearful of death. Dying is not unlike falling asleep. We have all experienced death many times in past lives. The astral body separates from the physical body, just as in sleep. The difference is that the silver cord connecting the two breaks at the moment of transition, signaling the point of no return.

Scriptures speak of leaving the body through one chakra or another, departing in a level of consciousness of a particular chakra, which then determines where in the inner worlds a person will find himself after death. Those who depart full of hatred and resentment go to the world of those who also died in lower consciousness. Those with love in their heart enter a world where abide others with similar attainment. Therefore, during transition a person must strive to be in the highest possible state of consciousness, concentrating on the top of the head and holding to lofty thoughts as he succumbs. A woman in California narrated: "Shortly before my husband died, he held my hands and asked me to recite the *Lalitha Sahasranama* and to say the mantra we were initiated into. He repeated after me in a loud voice when suddenly his face began to shine with a luster, and he became overjoyed and beaming. He started almost shouting in joy that he was seeing the temple and the Deities—Siva, Ganesha and Murugan—smiling at him. In this glowing way he passed away shortly thereafter while I recited the mantra in his ear."

Those who die suddenly, through accident or murder, have no time to prepare. Traditionally, full death rites are not performed after such deaths, because rebirth is expected almost immediately. For the same reason, rites are not accorded children who die young, before adolescence. In India, bodies of accidental-death victims and children are buried in a common grave or put in a river. Since neither is possible in Westernized countries, cremation is accepted.

Funeral and Memorial Rites: Hindus traditionally cremate their dead, for swifter, more complete release of the soul. Burial, which preserves the bond, is generally forbidden. Death's anniversary is called Liberation Day. For saints, it is celebrated rather than the day of birth. To some extent, the funeral rites serve to notify the departed soul that he has, in fact, died. It is possible for a disoriented soul, not understanding that he is on the other side, to linger close to the physical plane. He can still see this material world, and even observe his own funeral. Some of the ritual chants address the deceased, urging him to relinquish attachments and continue the journey. The rites are also for the living, allowing the family to say a respectable and dignified "farewell," to express grief, loss and the mosaic of emotions they naturally encounter. The deepest significance of the funeral rites lies in their yoking the inner and outer worlds, *Bhuloka* and *Devaloka*, and their recognition that a family consists not just of its living generations, but its ancestors as well. Often a group of souls will sequentially incarnate into the same extended family, so that, for example, a grandson may be the returned soul of the father. In this way collective karma and *dharma* are worked through. Those in the inner worlds help relatives living in the outer world. When their turn comes in the outer world, they strive to attain spiritual progress that is only possible in physical incarnation. Ceremonial uniting of the deceased with his forefathers and yearly honoring of ancestors keep open the inner communication which makes the family prosperous and preserves its longevity.

The *Vedas* proclaim, "When a person comes to weakness, be it through old age or disease, he frees himself from these limbs just as a mango, a fig or a berry releases itself from its stalk" (*Shukla Yajur Veda, Brihadharanyaka Upanishad* 4.3.36).

Rites of Transition

HINDU DEATH RITUALS in all traditions follow a fairly uniform pattern drawn from the *Vedas*, with variations according to sect, region, caste and family tradition. Most rites are fulfilled by the family, all of whom participate, including the children, who need not be shielded from the death. Certain rites are traditionally performed by a priest but may also be performed by the family if no priest is available. Here is a simple outline of rites that can be performed by Hindus in any locality. Variations are noted and suggestions made for Hindus in Western countries.

1. As Death Approaches

Traditionally, a Hindu dies at home. Nowadays the dying are increasingly kept in hospitals, even when recovery is clearly not possible. Knowing the merits of dying at home among loved ones, Hindus bring the ill home. When death is imminent, kindred are notified. The person is placed in his room or in the entryway of the house, with the head facing east. A lamp is lit near his head and he

is urged to concentrate on his mantra. Kindred keep vigil until the great departure, singing hymns, praying and reading scripture. If he cannot come home, this happens at the hospital, regardless of institutional objections.

2. The Moment of Death

If the dying person is unconscious at departure, a family member chants the mantra softly in the right ear. If none is known, "Aum Namō Nārāyaṇa" or "Aum Nama Sivaya" is intoned. (This is also done for sudden-death victims, such as on a battlefield or in a car accident.) Holy ash or sandal paste is applied to the forehead, Vedic verses are chanted, and a few drops of milk, Ganga or other holy water are trickled into the mouth. After death, the body is laid in the home's entryway, with the head facing south, on a cot or the ground—reflecting a return to the lap of Mother Earth. The lamp is kept lit near the head and incense burned. A cloth is tied under the chin and over the top of the head. The thumbs are tied together, as are the big toes. In

a hospital, the family has the death certificate signed immediately and transports the body home. Under no circumstances should the body be embalmed or organs removed for use by others. Religious pictures are turned to the wall, and in some traditions mirrors are covered. Relatives are beckoned to bid farewell and sing sacred songs at the side of the body.

3. The Homa Fire Ritual

If available, a special funeral priest is called. In a shelter built by the family, a fire ritual (*homa*) is performed to bless nine brass *kumbhas* (water pots) and one clay pot. Lacking the shelter, an appropriate fire is made in the home. The "chief mourner" leads the rites. He is the eldest son in the case of the father's death and the youngest son in the case of the mother's. In some traditions, the eldest son serves for both, or the wife, son-in-law or nearest male relative.

4. Preparing the Body

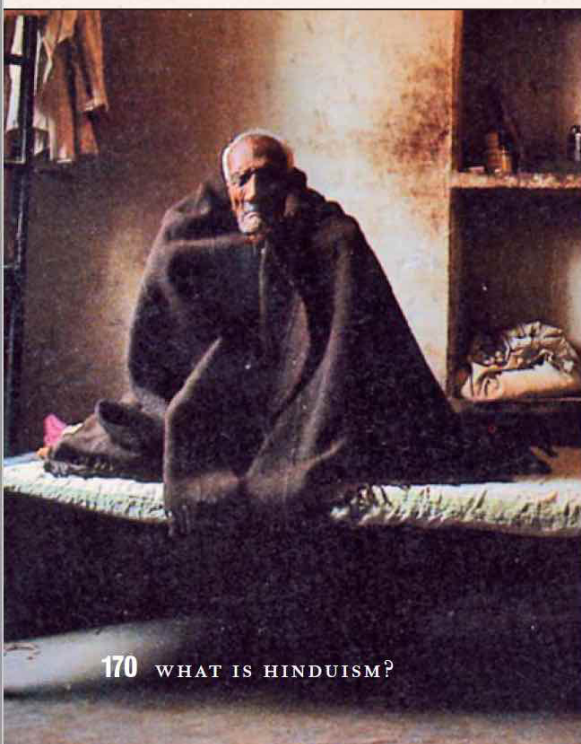
The chief mourner now performs *arati*, passing an oil lamp over the remains, then offering flowers. The male (or female, depending on the gender of the deceased) relatives carry the body to the back porch, remove the clothes and drape it with a white cloth. (If there is no porch, the body can be sponge bathed and prepared where it is.) Each applies sesame oil to the head, and the body is

bathed with water from the nine *kumbhas*, dressed, placed in a coffin (or on a palanquin) and carried to the *homa* shelter. The young children, holding small lighted sticks, encircle the body, singing hymns. The women then walk around the body and offer puffed rice into the mouth to nourish the deceased for the journey ahead. A widow will place her *tali* (wedding pendant) around her husband's neck, signifying her enduring tie to him. The coffin is then closed. If unable to bring the body home, the family arranges to clean and dress it at the mortuary rather than leave these duties to strangers. The ritual *homa* fire can be made at home or kindled at the crematorium.

5. Cremation

Only men go to the cremation site, led by the chief mourner. Two pots are carried: the clay *kumbha* and another containing burning embers from the *homa*. The body is carried three times counterclockwise around the pyre, then placed upon it. All circumambulating, and some *arati*, in the rites is counterclockwise. If a coffin is used, the cover is now removed. The men offer puffed rice as the women did earlier, cover the body with wood and offer incense and ghee. With the clay pot on his left shoulder, the chief mourner circles the pyre while holding a fire brand behind his back. At

Kasi, the holiest place to die: A man awaits his great departure; at the moment of death Ganga water is trickled into the mouth at the Mukti Bhavan free hospice; cremation grounds; women in mourning.



PHOTOS BY RAJESH BEDI

each turn around the pyre, a relative knocks a hole in the pot with a knife, letting water out, signifying life's leaving its vessel. At the end of three turns, the chief mourner drops the pot. Then, without turning to face the body, he lights the pyre and leaves the cremation grounds. The others follow. At a gas-fueled crematorium, sacred wood and ghee are placed inside the coffin with the body. Where permitted, the body is carried around the chamber, and a small fire is lit in the coffin before it is consigned to the flames. The cremation switch then is engaged by the chief mourner.

6. Return Home; Ritual Impurity

Returning home, all bathe and share in cleaning the house. A lamp and water pot are set where the body lay in state. The water is changed daily, and pictures remain turned to the wall. The shrine room is closed, with white cloth draping all icons. During these days of ritual impurity, family and close relatives do not visit others' homes, though neighbors and relatives bring daily meals to relieve the burdens during mourning. Neither do they attend festivals and temples, visit swamis, nor take part in marriage arrangements. Some observe this period up to one year. For the death of friends, teachers or students, observances are optional. While mourning is never suppressed or denied,

scriptures admonish against excessive lamentation and encourage joyous release. The departed soul is acutely conscious of emotional forces directed at him. Prolonged grieving can hold him in earthly consciousness, inhibiting full transition to the heaven worlds. In Hindu Bali, it is shameful to cry for the dead.

7. Bone-Gathering Ceremony

About 12 hours after cremation, family men return to collect the remains. Water is sprinkled on the ash; the remains are collected on a large tray. At crematoriums the family can arrange to personally gather the remains: ashes and small pieces of white bone called "flowers." In crematoriums these are ground to dust, and arrangements must be made to preserve them. Ashes are carried or sent to India for deposition in the Ganges or placed them in an auspicious river or the ocean, along with garlands and flowers.

8. First Memorial

On the 3rd, 5th, 7th or 9th day, relatives gather for a meal of the deceased's favorite foods. A portion is offered before his

photo and later ceremonially left at an abandoned place, along with some lit camphor. Customs for this period are varied. Some offer *pinda* (rice balls) daily for nine days. Others combine all these offerings with the following *sapindikarana* rituals for a few days or one day of ceremonies.

9. The 31st-Day Memorial

On the 31st day, a memorial service is held. In some traditions it is a repetition of the funeral rites. At home, all thoroughly clean the house. A priest purifies the home, and performs the *sapindikarana*, making one large *pinda* (representing the deceased) and three small, representing the

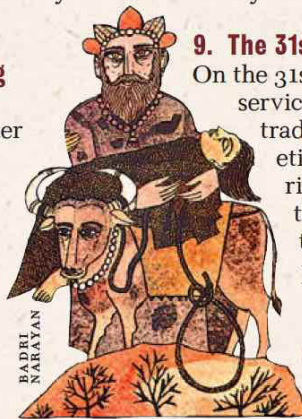
father, grandfather and great grandfather. The large ball is cut in three pieces and joined with the small *pindas* to ritually unite the soul with the ancestors in the next world. The *pindas* are fed to the crows, to a cow or thrown in a river for

the fish. Some perform this rite on the 11th day after cremation. Others perform it twice: on the 31st day or (11th, 15th, etc.) and after one year. Once the first *sapindikarana* is completed, the ritual impurity ends. Monthly repetition is also common for one year.

10. One-Year Memorial

At the yearly anniversary of the death (according to the moon calendar), a priest conducts the *shraddha* rites in the home, offering *pinda* to the ancestors. This ceremony is done yearly as long as the sons of the deceased are alive (or for a specified period). It is now common in India to observe *shraddha* for ancestors just prior to the yearly Navaratri festival. This time is also appropriate for cases where the day of death is unknown.

Hindu funeral rites can be simple or exceedingly complex. These ten steps, devotedly completed according to the customs, means, and ability of the family, will properly conclude one earthly sojourn of any Hindu soul.



Yama: Lord of Death

Recommended Resources: *Caring for Your own Dead*, Lisa Carlson, Upper Access Publishers, PO Box 457, Hinesburg, Vermont 05461. *Dialogue with Death*, Eknath Easwaran, Nilgiri Press, Box 477, Petaluma, California 94953. *Funeral and Other Sacraments After Death*, Jnana Prabodhini, 510 Sadashiv Petha, Pune 411 030, India. *Grihya Sutras*, Sacred Books of the East Series, Motilal Banarsidass, Bungalow Road, Jawaharnagar, New Delhi 7, India. *Hindu Samskaras*, Dr. Raj Bali Pandey, Motilal Banarsidass. *Life After Life*, Raymond A. Moody, Bantam Books, 1540 Broadway, New York, New York 10036. *Meditation and the Art of Dying*, Pandit Usharbudh Arya, Himalayan Institute, Honesdale, Pennsylvania 18431. *The Transition Called Death*, Charles Hampton, Theosophical Publishing House, 306 West Geneva Rd, Wheaton, Illinois 60187. *Dilemmas of Life and Death*, S. Cromwell Crowley, SUNY Press, Albany, New York 12246.





“Death is like falling asleep and birth is like awakening from that sleep.”
2000-year-old Hindu text



How Enlightened Beings Die

Ten Stories of the Final Moments of Great Sages & Ten Reasons Hindus Do Not Fear Death



INTRODUCTION BY RAMAI SANTHIRAPALA, LONDON; STORIES BY THE EDITORS



PIETER WELTEVEDE

There are two indubitable certainties: we were born, and we will die. This is not meant as a morose statement, but as an encouragement to consider the deeper purpose of our existence as an opportunity for spiritual progress. Hindus believe in *samsara*, the cyclical journey of life, death and rebirth, until such a time that one is freed from this pattern, thus achieving *moksha*, or spiritual freedom. Knowing this, adepts spend a lifetime preparing for their transition, the *mahaprasthan*, and effortlessly flow from life to death. Sushila Blackman's book *Graceful Exits* is a compendium detailing the grand departures of Hindu, Tibetan and Chinese Buddhist masters. It is that book upon which this Insight is based.

A Medical Perspective: The lenses through which I approach this book are twofold; first and foremost as a practicing Saivite Hindu and secondly as a medical doctor. I am trained in anaesthesia and intensive care medicine. In my field conversations on death and dying are not uncommon. This has left me contemplating the effects of life-support machines and powerful drugs on the mystical transition that is known as death. Recurrently I have found myself having soul-searching end-of-life discussions at a point when a patient is too sick to converse and a family remains unprepared for the loss of a loved one—it felt too little too late. In these highly emotive moments patients and families frequently cling to the chance of life, any chance, as to a piece of driftwood in a stormy sea.

In many cases there would have been a timely window of opportunity for such conversations when patients could still express their wishes, such as when they consult with a surgeon or anaesthesiologist before what is termed "high risk surgery" or with a cancer doctor during counseling for a course of chemotherapy. Even more ideal would be discussing end-of-life wishes as a routine conversation with the family doctor, just as one might review a routine blood pressure check, further demystifying the cultural taboo in the West sur-



SURESH MUTHUKULAM

rounding the word *death*.

There is a palpable change in consciousness happening within the medical profession today, with doctors themselves stating, when surveyed about their own end-of-life wishes, that less is more. For example, colleagues and I surveyed anesthesiologists at University College London Hospital. We found that over half were strongly concerned they might be given overly aggressive care at the end of their own life. They value quality of life over quantity.

In 2014, leading Harvard surgeon Professor Atul Gawande courageously published a landmark book entitled *Being Mortal*. Along with BBC's Reith Lectures, this book turned the spotlight on the increasing medicalization of death, highlighting the disparity between what patients truly value and how they actually die. Home is often cited as the preferred place of death by patients, yet the majority continue to die in healthcare institutions. How beautifully this desire to be at home echoes the wisdom of the East, where the dying are dutifully surrounded by prayerful vigils and the loving attention

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The artist depicts Mahakala (a form of Siva), the Hindu Deity who oversees time and dwells in cremation grounds. He, with Kali, is responsible for the dissolution of the universe at the end of each kalpa.

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This changing consciousness of the medical profession, with doctors eschewing heroic interventions in their own last days, is perhaps an example of science and spirituality coming together as the Sat Yuga dawns.
.....

of close family. The purpose of such preparations is to encourage the soul to exit through the highest chakra, as well as to notify astral-plane helpers of an imminent arrival. So revered is the time of transition that my Guru says to be near a realized soul at the time of samadhi is a blessing that surpasses 1,008 visits at other times.

As I pondered the medical profession's move from the science of postponing death to the art of dying, *Graceful Exits* appeared in my inbox as an intriguing window into the spiritual nature of the transition known as death.

At the end of the upcoming stories, I will offer a review of Shushila Blackman's book, which is short in pages but profound in wisdom.

Ten Tales of Transition & Our Artists

In the pages to follow we share the last moments of ten great souls. Their stories can inform our own understandings of death and our ability to be present at the passage of others. As you will see, death to the spiritually awakened is not a fearsome thing. It can be playful or prayerful, but it is always powerful. The ten sages were painted by Pieter Weltevrede of Amsterdam, and the illustrated numbers were created by Ayala Wise who specializes in sacred geometry (TheMandalaWorkshop.com).



DEATH IS UNREAL

The first reason not to fear death is that it does not exist. According to Hindu mysticism, death is a myth, a kind of alternative fact repeated again and again, foisted on us as real, like the fabled unicorn. Death does not exist in the sense most people define it. It's like the sun coming up in the morning. People say the sun is rising and think of it that way, but the sun doesn't come up; the earth revolves to reveal the sun. Similarly, death does not end our existence: we just drop off our outer shell and continue our journey in the inner worlds.

If we have not yet achieved moksha, we eventually return to physical birth to resolve our remaining karmas. While most people fear it as a bugaboo, death is actually a miraculous leap in our evolution.



PIETER WELTEVEDE

RAMANA MAHARSHI

1879–1950

In 1947, at age 68, Ramana Maharshi was suffering from cancer. When the doctors suggested amputating his left arm above a large tumor, Ramana replied with a smile: "There is no need for alarm. The body is itself a disease. Let it have its natural end. Why mutilate it? A simple dressing on the affected part will do." Two operations were performed to remove the tumor, but it appeared again, as large as a coconut. Indigenous systems of medicine were tried, and homeopathy, too, but the disease did not yield to treatment. The sage, supremely indifferent to suffering, remained unconcerned. He sat as a spectator watching the disease waste the body; his eyes shone as bright as ever, and his grace flowed toward all beings. Many were coming to say goodbye to the master. In this tradition, it is regarded as a special blessing to be near a realized soul at the time he or she gives up the body. Ramana insisted that the crowds be allowed to have his darshan, and he had his bed placed in a public courtyard. Devotees came and went for weeks as his body slowly diminished. Ramana had compassion for those who grieved, and he sought to comfort them by reminding them of the truth that he was not the body. The Great Departure came on April 14, 1950. That evening the sage gave darshan to all present in the ashram. They sat singing his favorite hymn to Arunachala, the form of Siva as an infinite pillar of light. He asked his attendants to help him sit up. He smiled as a tear trickled down his cheek, and at 8:47pm his breathing stopped. As instructed, devotees prepared a pit in the earth and placed the body there in yogic pose, encasing it in salt. Such interments of great masters are revered as supremely holy. Later a Sivalingam was installed above the crypt and a temple was built around it, thus capturing the sage's divine consciousness.



GAUTAMA, THE BUDDHA

CIRCA 563–483 BCE

As he was approaching his own death, Gautama, the Buddha, gathered his monks together and said: "Of all footprints, those of the elephant are supreme; of all meditations, that on death is supreme." When all had gathered during his final hours, the Buddha gave a sermon.

"It is not appropriate to grieve in an hour of joy... You all weep, but is there any cause for grief? We should look upon a sage as a person who has escaped from a burning mansion... It does not matter whether I am here or not; your salvation does not depend upon me, but upon practicing the Dharma, just as a cure depends not upon seeing the doctor, but upon taking his medicine... My time has come, my work is done... Everything eventually comes to an end, even if it should last for an eon. I have done what I could for myself and others, and to remain longer would be without purpose.

"Recognize that all that lives is subject to the laws of impermanence, and strive for eternal wisdom. When the light of knowledge dispels ignorance, when the world is seen as without substance, the end of life is seen as peace and as a cure to a disease. Everything that exists is bound to perish. Be therefore mindful of your salvation. The time of my passing has come."



REINCARNATION

The second reason not to fear death is that we all reincarnate. Death is not the end of the line. Our scriptures tell us that instead of defining death as an end of ourself, we should realize it is but one phase of the larger reincarnational process.

Many young children and the best of mystics remember their past births, and their remembrances are a reminder that we, too, have lived and died before and will live and die again. The fact of reincarnation can be a great solace for those who look upon death with trepidation. We have many more chances to get it right!



DEATH IS NATURAL

The third reason not to fear death is that releasing the body is the way of things. All that lives ultimately dies. It is the return of the mortal to the immortal, the time-bound to the infinite source. Some describe it as a river flowing back to its source, the ocean. The water is not destroyed in that merging. That which was two becomes one again. Those who have had near-death experiences report it is not painful. Near-death studies reveal it is a time of elevated consciousness, unity, light and love. It can also be accompanied by great mental lucidity and out-of-body awareness.

Those who have returned from death report they could hear the doctors' conversations about their heart stopping, could see their family mourning. Much is being revealed by these explorations into the moment of departure.



BHAGAVAN NITYANANDA

1897–1961

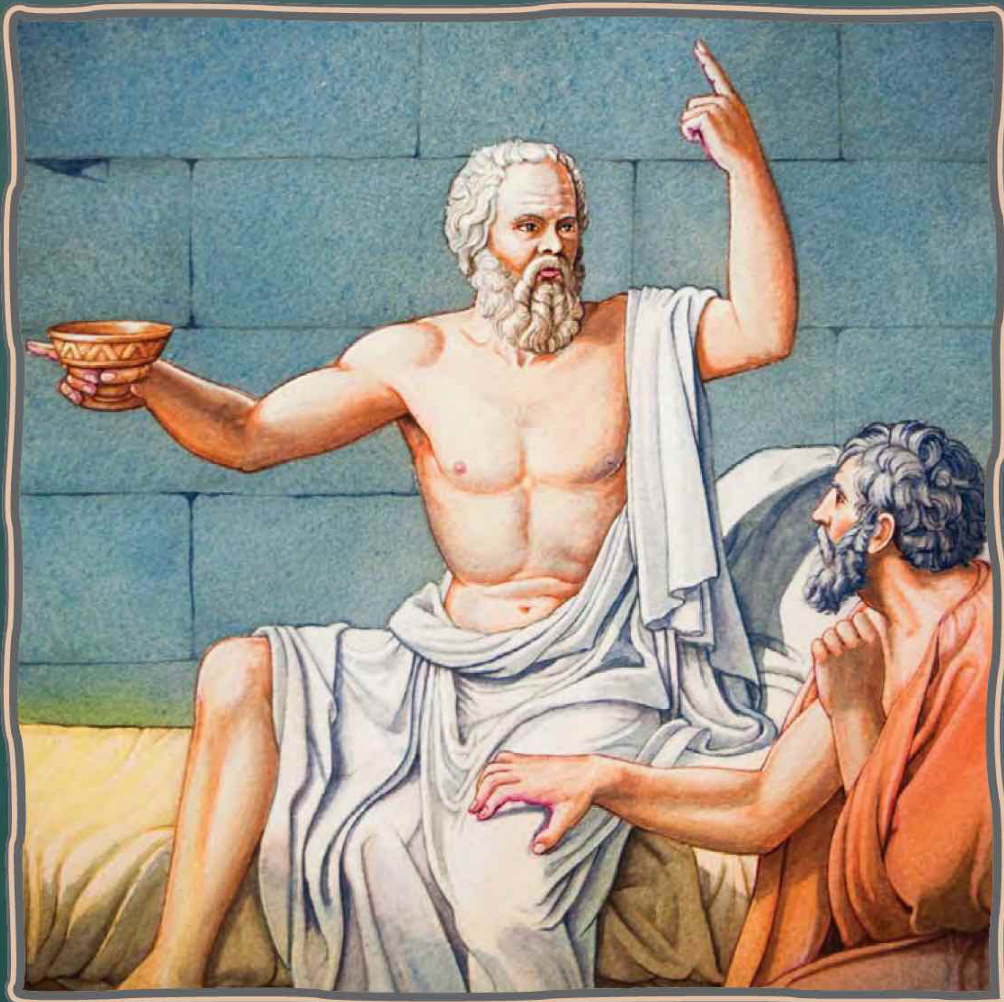
Three months before Bhagawan Nityananda took mahasamadhi, his disciple Mataji came for darshan. Learning that he had developed a serious ear infection, she began to weep. The master chided, "Why are you crying? Don't cry. More work is possible in the subtle world than in the gross." Two months before his departure, Nityananda virtually stopped eating. He just drank water and occasionally ate some fruit. His body, once massive, grew gaunt and feeble. No amount of imploring could persuade him to take food. Doctors were sent for, but he was disinterested in physicians and drugs, not wishing to keep the body any longer. One devotee asked, "Baba, it gives me great pain to see your present condition and weak body. Why can't you use your divine powers to cure your illness?" The master answered, "This body is mere dust and mud. Spiritual power is not to be used for such things." About 9:30 on the final morning, Bhagawan directed that coffee be served as prasad to all present. With a smile, he gave a fruit to a young boy, then took two or three very deep breaths. His eyes assumed the *shambhavi mudra*, turned upward to the third eye. Devotees watched as the *sushumna* nerve throbbled between his brows. The sound *Aum* was heard in the room as his life breath merged in the cosmos.



SOCRATES

470-399 BCE

At the age of 71, the Greek philosopher Socrates was accused by the government of Athens of arousing skepticism, inventing new Deities and corrupting the youth of the city. A trial found him guilty, and he was condemned. He was given the choice to be exiled and never teach again, or to accept death by drinking poison hemlock. Socrates boldly rejected exile and opted for death by his own hand. On the fateful day, his distraught disciples gathered around him in the state prison. Even as he reached for the bowl of hemlock prepared by the executioner, Socrates continued to teach, unmoved by his impending demise. After drinking the poison he told those present he was praying for a fortunate transfer from this world to the next. His last words were, "Crito, we owe a rooster to Asclepius. Please, don't forget to pay the debt" Asclepius was the Greek god of medicine, and a rooster was a normal offering of thanks for recovery from illness. Socrates believed he was cured of the disease of life, and was not frightened by his death. This mundane farewell showed the sage's detachment from death's approach. It also points to a common end-of-life practice of mystics, who strive to resolve all karmas, make amends, settle debts, seek and give forgiveness.

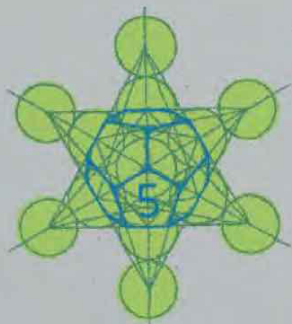


DEATH IS LIBERATION

The fourth reason not to fear death is that it is liberation, a joyous and elevating experience. Hindus call death the Great Departure. For a master, death is not a loss but a release from samsara, for which the Sanskrit word is *moksha*. Enlightened ones know that the world beyond earthly embodiment is greater, sweeter and more profound.

Neem Karoli Baba, when he saw his departure was near, told his sorrowful disciples, "Today I am being released from Central Jail forever."

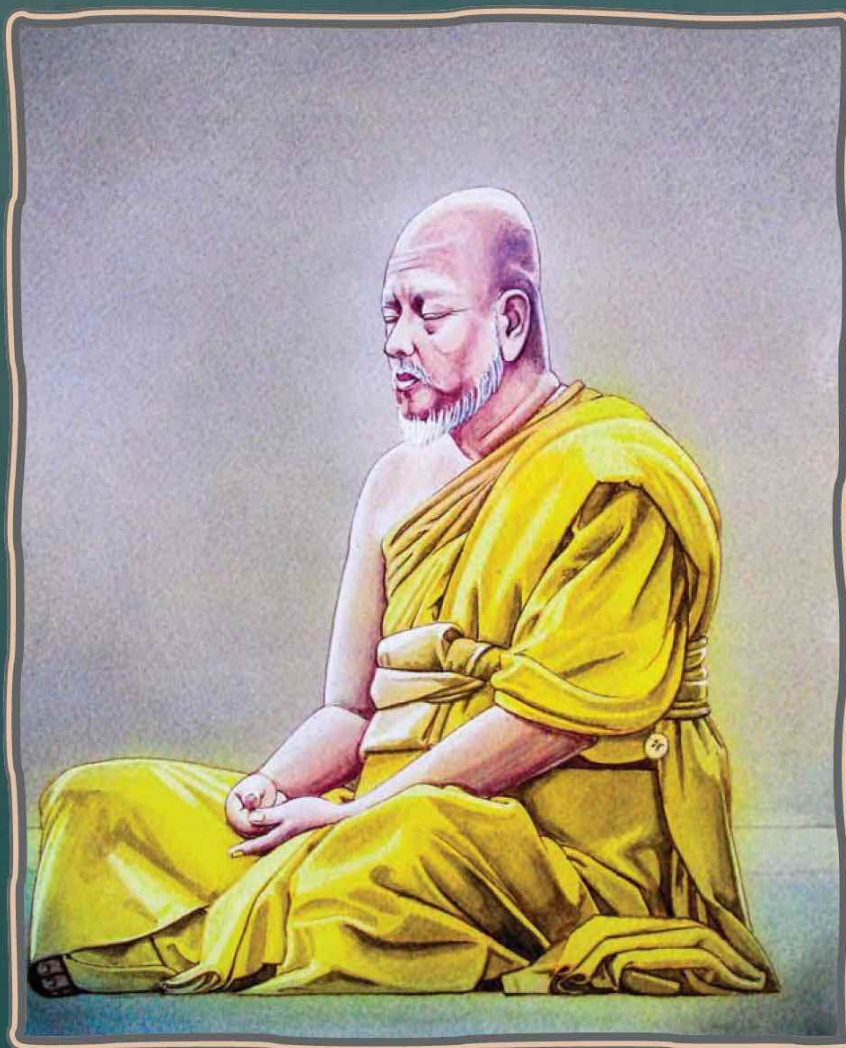
He understood that death is a most exalted state. Isn't it foolish to fear letting go of the limited physical to be embraced by the infinite Self within?



DEATH IS A RELEASE FROM SUFFERING

The fifth reason not to fear death is that it removes earthly pains and sufferings. When the soul lets go of the body, the mind is released from debilitating and sometimes unbearable pain.

Transition also marks the promise of a physical and mental upgrade, turning in worn-out equipment for new, fully functioning parts. It is more beginning than end.



TUNG-SHAN

807–869

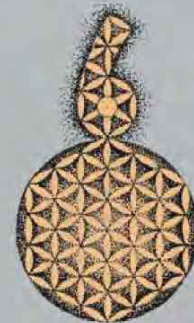
When Zen master Tung-shan, the founder of the Soto school of Buddhism, felt it was time for him to go, he had his head shaved, took a bath, put on his robes, rang the bell to bid farewell to the community, and sat up till he breathed no more. Thereupon the whole community burst out crying grievously, as little children do at the death of their mother. Suddenly the master opened his eyes and scolded the weeping monks, "We monks are supposed to be detached from all things transitory. In this consists true spiritual life. To live is to work, to die is to rest. What is the use of groaning and moaning?" He then ordered a "stupidity-removing" meal for the whole community. After the meal, he said to them, "Please make no fuss over me! Be calm as befits a family of monks! Generally speaking, when anyone is at the point of going, he has no use for noise and commotion." He then returned to the abbot's room where he sat in meditation until he passed away.



MILAREPA

1052–1135

Milarepa was a renowned yogi of Tibet with vast occult powers. His death was brought about by poison, prepared by an enemy named Tsaphu-wa and delivered by the man's lover. Immediately, as the woman approached, Milarepa cognized her nefarious intent. Realizing his greatness, she fell at his feet, weeping in remorse, and begged him to allow her to consume the deadly food herself. Refusing her offer, Milarepa himself imbibed the poisoned curd, saying, "My life has almost run its course; my work is finished; the time has come for me to go to another world." His devotees gathered sacred offerings and performed a puja, pleading with their master to invoke his powers to prolong his life with them. But the yogi was firm that he had exhausted his karmas, had made friends of his enemies and with the blessings of his guru was prepared for his next journey. The poison slowly did its work, and days later Milarepa gave his "final testament of precepts." This last sermon was offered during his cremation, as he sat majestically within the flames in his Indestructible Body, with Gods and devas filling the sky: "In the samsaric ocean of the lokas three, the great culprit is the impermanent physical body, busy in its craving search for food and dress; from worldly works it never finds relief. Renounce, O Rechung, every worldly thing. ...O gurus, devas, dakinis: combine these three into a single whole and gain experimental knowledge—this life, the next life, and the life between. Regard them as one, and make thyself accustomed to them as one."



DEATH IS EASY

The sixth reason not to fear death is that it is a normal human experience, like sleep. People who have been with hundreds of dying people report that something miraculous, even sacred happens in the final hours and moments. The dying surrender to the process; they don't resist. In fact, they are drawn to their destination with awe and even eagerness. A sign of this can be found in the last six words spoken by Apple founder Steven Jobs: "Oh Wow! **Oh Wow!** OH Wow!"

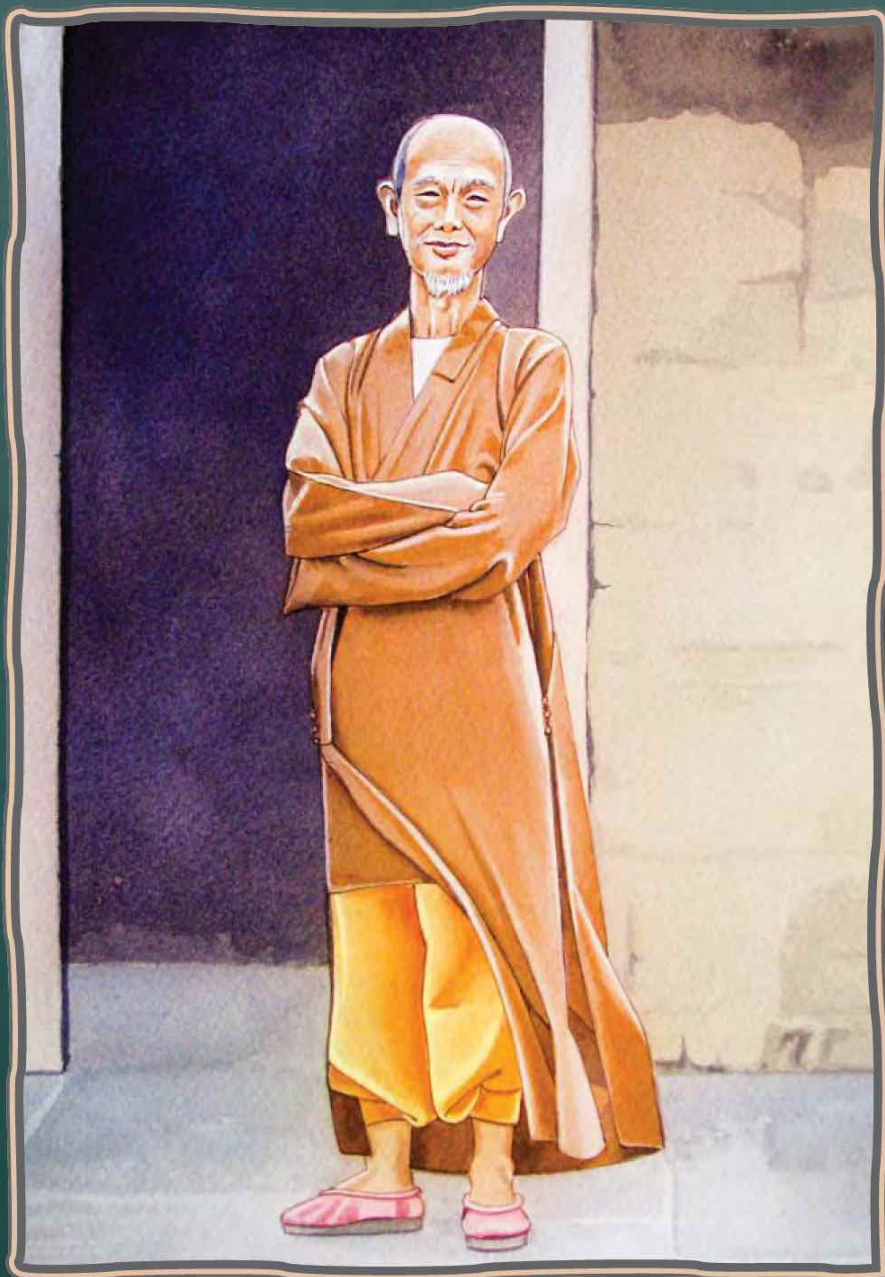
Death is a natural experience, not to be feared any more than sleep. It is a quick transition from the physical world to the astral plane, like walking through a door, leaving one room and entering another. Some yogis consider that each night, when we sleep, we experience a micro death.



EVERYBODY DOES IT

The seventh reason not to fear death is that it happens every day to so many. Each day on Earth 155,000 people die. That's over 6,500 every hour, or 108 every minute. There is no reason to fear what so many experience each day.

Here is an interesting factoid: the Population Reference Bureau estimates that throughout known history 108.2 billion people have lived and died. That's 15 times as many as are alive on Earth today.



CHIH-HSIEN

CIRCA 830–905

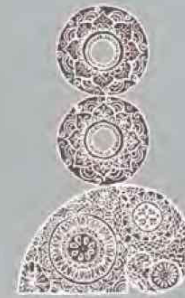
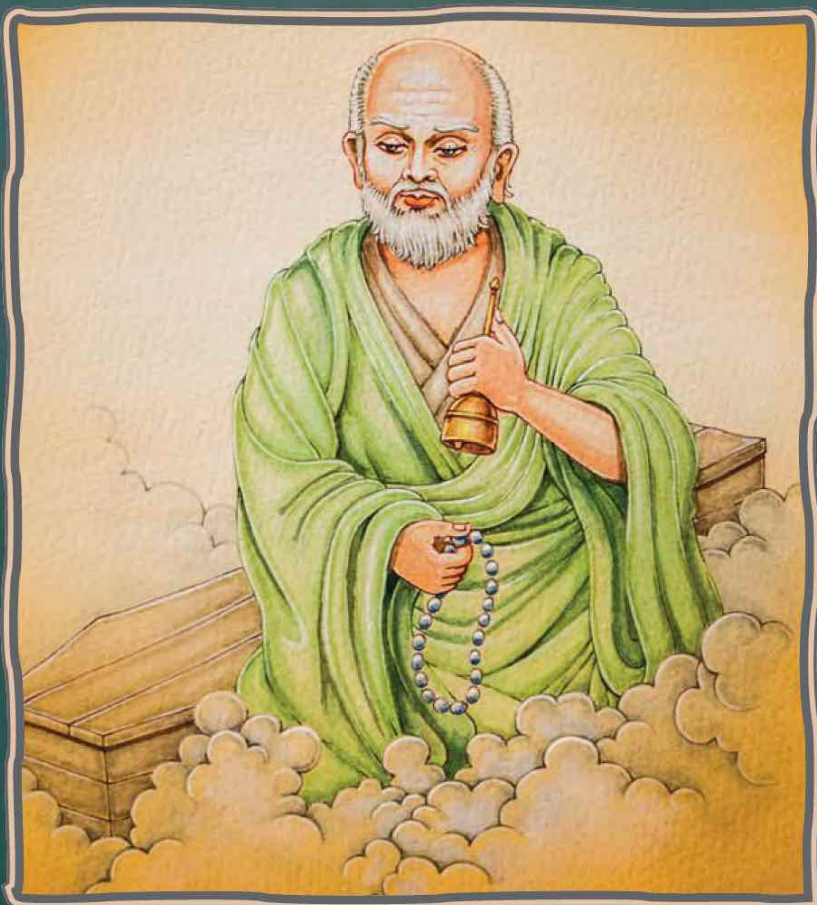
Just before the Chinese Zen master Chih-hsien passed away in 905, he asked his attendants, "Who dies sitting?" They answered, "A monk." He inquired further, "Who dies standing?" They replied, "Enlightened monks." He then walked seven steps, with his hands at his sides, and died. Many Buddhist monks regard such a fully conscious death as a sign of spiritual attainment. They prefer to leave the body sitting upright in meditation, or while standing or even walking in the garden—rather than lying down—so as to release the body with full intent and awareness.



P'U-HUA

770–860

When the Chinese monk, wanderer and eccentric Master P'u-hua sensed his end was near, he announced to the people of the nearby town that he would go the next day to the Eastern Gate and die there. Wishing to be at this extraordinary event, the whole community walked in procession behind him and assembled to pay their final respects. P'u-hua then announced: "A funeral today would not be in accord with the mythical Blue Crow. I will pass away tomorrow at the Southern Gate." The next day most people followed him again, but upon his arrival he decreed, "It would be more auspicious to leave by the Western Gate tomorrow." On the third day fewer people came, and he decided on the North Gate instead. Some say this was his way of having only the most ardent followers attend his Great Departure and not just the curious. On day four, P'u-hua walked alone outside the city walls and laid himself into the coffin. He asked a traveler who chanced by to nail down the lid. Somehow the news spread, and the people rushed to see him. Upon opening the coffin, they found no body inside, but from high up in the sky they heard the ringing of the master's hand bell.



NATURE POINTS THE WAY

The eighth reason not to fear death is that methods have been provided. Look at nature, how effortlessly creatures expire. At our monastery when the cats or cows near their end, they simply stop eating, lie down under a tree in the pasture and release the body. In the Jain tradition, *santhara* is the practice of voluntarily fasting to death by gradually reducing the intake of food and liquids. Not undertaken lightly or unilaterally, it requires a public declaration, community consent and guidance under an ascetic. This manner of exiting the body is viewed in Jainism as the thinning of human passions and the body, and a means of destroying rebirth-influencing karma by withdrawing from all physical and mental activities. This is not considered suicide by Jain scholars because it is not an act of passion, nor does it employ poisons or weapons. A sacred vow is taken before the ritual preparation and practice begins. Though rare in modern times, this formal fasting to death is being rediscovered in India.

There is debate about the practice between the right-to-life and freedom-of-religion viewpoints. The Rajasthan High Court banned the practice in 2015, ruling it suicide. Later that same year, the Supreme Court of India reversed the lower court's decision and lifted the ban, which made it legal again in India to do a simple thing: stop eating.



SAGES & SCRIPTURE ASSURE US

The ninth reason not to fear death is the assurance of holy ones and our sacred scriptures. Here are a few gems to guide the way:

“Desireless, wise, immortal, self-existent, full of bliss, lacking in nothing is the one who knows the wise, unaging, youthful soul within him. He fears not death!”

Atharva Veda X, 8, 446

“From goodness, understanding is reached. From understanding, the Self is obtained, and he who obtains the Self is freed from the cycle of birth and death.”

Maitreya Upanishad 4.3

Death is like falling asleep, and birth is like waking from that sleep.

Tirukural 339

“A man of discrimination and wisdom is not afraid of death. He knows that death is the gate of life. Death, to him, is no longer a skeleton bearing a sword to cut the thread of life, but rather an angel who has a golden key to unlock for him the door to a far wider, fuller and happier existence. It is necessary for your evolution.”

Swami Sivananda

The *Katha Upanishads* declares, “There is one part of us which must die; there is another part which never dies. When a man can identify himself with his undying nature, which is one with God, then he overcomes death.”

Swami Paramananda



A TIBETAN MONK

DATE UNKNOWN

Certain Tibetan yogis have mastered the winds— the pranas, or inner airs, that flow through the subtle body. One day one such being, a retreat master at a monastery in Kham, asked his attendant: “I am going to die soon. Please look in the calendar for an auspicious date.” Though stunned, the attendant examined the calendar and told the master that all the stars were auspicious on the following Monday. “That is three days away. Well, I think I can make it,” the master replied. A little later, the attendant returned to the room and found the master sitting upright in yogic meditation posture, so still that it seemed he had already passed away. There was no breathing, but a faint pulse was perceptible. The attendant decided not to do anything, but to wait. At noon he heard a deep exhalation, and the master returned to his normal condition, spoke in a joyful mood, and asked for his lunch, which he ate with relish. He had been holding his breath for the whole of the morning session of meditation. The master taught that the human life span is counted as a finite number of breaths, and believing he was near the end of these, he held his breath so that the number would not be reached until the auspicious day. Just after lunch, he took another deep breath, and did not exhale until evening. He did the same the next day, and the next. When Monday came, he asked for confirmation: “Is today the auspicious day?” “Yes,” the attendant replied. “Fine, I shall go today.” Within hours, without illness or difficulty, the master passed away in meditation.



SUBRAMUNIASWAMI

1927–2001

On October 6, 2001, doctors in Hawaii discovered Gurudeva had advanced metastasized cancers in his colon, small intestine and brain. Three teams of specialists confirmed that he had not long to live. Ten days later he informed his senior monks that he had decided to fast to death. He had taught of this traditional way of leaving a terminally ill body, called *prayopavesha*, and now he would himself follow that difficult regimen, preferring the conscious departure of the yogi to weeks or months of medical intervention and systemic deterioration leading to loss of consciousness. Gurudeva asked how long this would take. After hearing about others who had fasted in this manner, he said, "So, in about 24 days it will be over and I will be with you 24 hours a day, not just during sixteen waking hours." In the ensuing weeks, his own departure was not the most onerous work. It was assuaging the sorrow in the hearts of his monks. He offered encouragement and solace, at one point whispering, "Everything that is happening is good. Everything that is happening is meant to be." His goal now was to resolve all karmas and depart through the crown chakra. One evening the monks gathering around his bed took turns reading from his seminal talk, *The Self God*. In the dim light, the room bristled with shakti. Breaking the silence, Gurudeva commented, "So, the Self God was true in the 1950s and it is still true in the 2000s." All laughed in acknowledgment that the Absolute Truth is always the same, always true, transcending life and death. There is a form of breathing, called Cheyne–Stokes, that the dying experience for a few hours. A deep breath is taken and held for up to a minute, when another such breath comes. When Gurudeva did this for ten days, his doctor said, "That's astonishing. It can only be attributed to his lifetime of meditation." At one point, in the dark of night, Gurudeva told the monks that Yogaswami, his own guru, had come to him. He then said, "Everything is finished. All is complete."



AWARENESS IS IMMORTAL

The tenth reason not to fear death is that you are awareness, and awareness is eternal and deathless. The new science of consciousness is exploring multiverses, non-local awareness and cosmic unity. The old science (still alive and well and in the majority) tells us life begins with protobacteria, evolves to single-celled then multicellular organisms, into fungi, plants, protozoa, insects, worms, reptiles, and mammals, such as *Homo sapiens*. With advanced animals and humans came the cerebral cortex, which they say creates consciousness.

Old-school scientists don't know what consciousness is, but they are certain that it is an epiphenomenon of matter, and when the brain dies, consciousness ceases to exist! The new science retorts, "No, no, no. The brain does not create consciousness. Consciousness creates the brain, and continues after brain death." Evidence of the nonmaterial existence of consciousness is drawn from near-death experiences, out-of-the-body experiences, non-local awareness, reincarnational experiences and the wild world of quantum physics. Consciousness studies confirm what Hindu mystics have been saying for millennia: you are the All and Everything.



“We will do all we can not only to help you die peacefully, but also to live until you die.”



“There is a sacredness in tears. They are not the mark of weakness, but of power.” Washington Irving