

Facing Life, Beyond Life



A short night

wakes me from a dream

that seemed so long.

~ Yayu (1783)

The following piece is my humble investigation into my fear of death; the fear of my own (impending) death and also the fear of the eventual death of a loved one. This journey began 8 years ago with my mother's sudden death. It has been insightful that while processing my grief some years down the line, a psychotherapist helped me conclude, that the trauma resulting from a loved one's death, can actually embed itself in hypochondriac behaviour. The consequent anxiety about my own health and mortality, however, opened doors for me to investigate the nature of the 'personal' self, the fear of losing that personal identity, and the illusion of the finality of death. The pandemic has further forced us to look at our unquestioned mortality and evaluate the parameters of our identity in these uncertain times.

"Detached" observer

of blossoms

finds himself in time

intimate with them--

so, when they separate from the branch,

it's he who falls...deeply into grief.

~ Saigyō (Translated by William LeFleur)

While spending time in the terrace garden during the lockdown, I often felt melancholic when I noticed a small bud bloom gently into a magnificent flower, only to fall in a short time and wither away. I pondered this seemingly tragic quality of impermanence. But it struck me that each and every flower lives, fulfilling its duty by exuding its fragrance, and disseminating Beauty, even evoking joy. Would a flower ever worry about falling off a branch to die? And would the shortness of its life reduce the fullness with which it offers itself? The blossoms seem to meet death in the face, whenever it chooses to come. It is as if they are living from moment to moment, content with the time accorded to them, fully able to devote their effort to living. Their silent sense of joy and uninhibited ability to experience each moment became extremely inspiring for me, shedding light on my own paranoia. The negative fantasies I indulge about difficult health scenarios, and the fear of an uncertain tomorrow have been paralyzing and deterred me from living in the present more fully. In the present moment, even where there is some difficulty or pain or resistance, I do realise that a higher 'witnessing' self can choose to experience the fear gracefully and allow that transient emotion too to pass.

Renowned Buddhist Teacher Ajahn Chah held up a beautiful Chinese tea cup and said, "To me this cup is already broken. Because I know its fate, I can enjoy it fully here and now. And when it's gone, it's gone." This again invites me to introspect on this illusion of control, and the freedom that lies in learning to gently accept the Truth about the transient and uncertain nature of the physical body. The key is the acceptance of this truth, the conviction that the broken cup is destiny, not an aberration. It is as if life is trying to draw our attention to something that lies beyond the visible tangible realm of objects.

Today I put on summer

clothes and journey

to a world I haven't seen yet.

-Michikaze (1709)

But what is 'death' really? A termination of the stream of consciousness as we understand it? A complete unification with the dark void of nothingness? A sleep so utterly deep that no one can awaken us from it? And to my utter horror, if I ever woke up from this sleep, would I perhaps fail to recognise myself? However, this may not be the right way to investigate this most mysterious aspect of life. Instead, perhaps much more interesting is if there is still a sense of 'existing' and 'living' after what we call 'death', without the body. All esoteric wisdom concurs that the real nature of the human being is not limited to the body, emotions, or the thinking mind. Akin to sand trickling from between slippery fingers, our present identity, wealth, possessions, status, attachments, families, friends - everything in its current form will not travel with us after

death. And if these are all transient by nature, who is the 'I' beyond all the impermanence?

Then unravelling this truth, of discerning between the eternal and temporary aspects of us, is the beginning of trying to comprehend our true nature. There may have been some opportune deep moments of silence or a sense of meditative timelessness that some may have experienced, when faced with a deeply beautiful natural landscape, a wondrous bird, or a magical piece of art, that makes us realise that we *are*, even when the thinking mind or the sense of 'I' is absent.

Therefore, I choose to walk on the path of philosophy in the classical manner, through which I discovered that we are not our 'personalities' or 'bodies; instead, timeless traditions suggest that we are essentially souls, drops of an ocean of ONE unified field of consciousness. Investigation of this truth, that I am a soul, and that the physical body is just an expression of the real me, in time and space, is just the beginning. And developing this conviction may take many lifetimes to ripen. But this also has an implication on how I decide to live my life in the present.

Mystics and the esoteric wisdom of The Vedas and Buddhism, all propound the truth of reincarnation and suggest that we keep 'dropping' our bodies like old clothes at the end of each life, and take on new ones, to keep continuing our journey of evolution of consciousness, till we truly learn to live our true nature. For me, the philosophical path is essentially about becoming able to live this 'truth' in my everyday life. If I believe that I am a soul, then that brings me to accept the fact that I simply don a different personality in every incarnation... and everyone else too, appears with a new role, new gender, new nationality, new karmic identity; beneath the different masks, all of us are but a fraternity of souls. A deep sense of love for all beings emerges. And I also feel lesser preoccupied with seeking more comforts and validation for the temporary self. Instead, I search for answers: Why have I been given this body? How can I use this personality better to serve me?

I also realise that awareness of death enables us to live each moment, appreciating the opportunity to create something of our time on earth. Bhutanese people, for example, contemplate death five times a day as part of their tradition. Wouldn't that appear morbid to the rest of us? But no; it seems to hold the key to a deeper sense of joy. Perhaps the ongoing contemplation of death can invite us to engage with life more meaningfully and joyfully, in every action, no matter how mundane. The present moment never returns. And confronting the reality of death triggers within us the desire to bring beauty, courage and joy into each moment of our lives. Can I continually exercise the choice to be more centred, and live a more virtuous, empathetic and just life?

So then, why fear Death? The deep inner knowing and conviction will shine through my essence when it will; in the meantime, I shall stay committed to living my life, learning to accept the joys and sorrows, witness and challenge my fears boldly, learn to love, and use this transient body as a tool to elevate my consciousness. All ancient Wisdom propounds that 'Death' and 'Birth' are just two commas in the continuity of existence and hence Life always continues.



The great Sufi Mystic Rumi writes, “Every mortal will taste death, but very few will taste life.” Just before his death, he is said to have recited one of his most inspirational poems. I end this investigation with an excerpt from Rumi’s alluring poem called *When I Die*. (translated by Nader Khalili).

“Remember a grave is only a curtain for the paradise behind.

You'll only see me descending into a grave. Now watch me rise.

How can there be an end, when the sun sets or the moon goes down.

It looks like the end, It seems like a sunset, but in reality, it is a dawn,

when the grave locks you up, that is when your soul is freed.

Have you ever seen a seed fallen to earth not rise with a new life?

Why should you doubt the rise of a seed named human?

Have you ever seen a bucket lowered into a well coming back empty?

Why lament for a soul when it can come back like Joseph from the well.

When, for the last time, you close your mouth,

Your words and soul will belong to the world of no place, no time.”