

Chapter 4

Exploring Your Soul's Journey

Topics in this Chapter:

- * Remembering why you're here
- * Gaining benefits from every experience
- * Unraveling the mystery of death

Here you are — in your body and in this world. There's no sense in worrying too much about how you got here, since you're already here. A better approach is to focus on what you should be doing now that you're here. But where is the instruction manual?

Chapter 3 guides you into a greater awareness of who you really are. Here, in Chapter 4, you find more big questions of life:

- Why are you here?
- Is there something specific that you're supposed to do?
- Where will you go next?

The theatre doors are open — come on in and watch the play of your life.

Why Are You Here?

As far as we can discern, the sole purpose of human existence is to kindle a light of meaning in the darkness of mere being.

—Carl Jung

Contrary to what today's commercialized society may say, spirituality says that you are *not* here on earth just to be a consumer of more and more material goods. Rather, your spiritual calling is to look beneath the surface of worldly life to find a spiritual journey that is filled with extraordinary blessings and insights.

Exploring your soul's journey is like having a front-row ticket to the grandest production of all — the story of your life. As you watch all the plot twists and turns, you also come to realize that you are playing the starring role in your movie. If you're funny, it's a comedy; if you're evil, it's a horror show. If you're romantic, it's a chick flick.

Spirituality in Action

Finding your role

One of the greatest blessings is to catch a glimpse of your role and mission. Although your personal goals may shift as you grow and change during the seasons of your life, you can still find great benefit in contemplating and becoming familiar with what your skills are, what your deeper aspirations are, what you like, what you're good at doing, and what comes naturally to you. When these observations about your nature come together to create a vision of your role in life, then you find it easier to act in ways that are harmonious with your greater nature.

Take a few moments and write down the answer to these questions: What is my purpose in life? What do I bring to the party? What can I contribute to this potluck dinner of life?

To help discover your mission in life, look back to your childhood. What were your natural interests and abilities? What kinds of things were you good at doing? What did you choose to do in your spare time? What do you choose to do in your free time now? What kinds of efforts seem to flow naturally through you? What brings a smile of contentment to your spirit? Even if quick and final answers don't pop up right away, the very act of exploring these questions can open doors to discovering more about what you really love to do, so you can follow that bliss into a greater awareness of your role.

Don't Forget

Regardless of the genre of your current life story, the spiritual key is to understand that you are the actor behind the roles, as well as ultimately the director, screenwriter, and audience. (See Chapter 14 for a description of how you are one with the divine consciousness that plays all roles.)

Why are you here? Have you ever asked yourself this question? Certainly, it's an essential query, worthy of deep consideration. After all, if you don't even have an inkling of why you're here, how can you expect to achieve your task?

Imagine a classroom where neither the teacher nor the children have any idea why they are there. What will they do with their time? Maybe they'll spend the semester playing or enjoying cookies and juice. A setup like this may make for a fun time; however, the children wouldn't be prepared for the next grade. They would probably have to return and take the same class all over again next year.

If the teacher still didn't know the purpose of that class, the children again wouldn't learn their lessons, and would perhaps spend their entire lives repeating the same class over and over again.

This scenario is similar to what some spiritual teachers say can happen with the process of reincarnation and soul evolution. If you come to this world with no idea of why you are here, it may take a very long time for you to graduate from your current life lessons into higher and greater spiritual realms.

Spiritual Wisdom

The entire field of relative existence has a single purpose: the attainment of supreme reality, and the consequent liberation of the questing soul.

—Swami Nirmalananda Giri

Your life lessons may include:

- Remembering who you really are
- Experiencing the flavors of human experience
- Discovering how to respond to the events of your life
- Learning from everything that comes your way
- Staying true to your higher nature at all times
- Remembering to look at your life as a play and to enjoy the show.

You're here to evolve

According to many spiritual traditions, your soul is continually growing, blossoming, and evolving in many seen and unseen ways. Every soul is at a different level of evolution, and even within different levels, each evolving soul is in many grades at once.

For example, you may have learned some life lessons exceptionally well, while other realizations, understandings, behaviors, and transformations may still have a way to go. Even highly evolved spiritual beings can still have significant life lessons to learn, although they may have achieved much in other areas.

Consider

If you're in a three-dimensional body, you probably have more to learn!

Spirit has entered this world through your body, personality, and set of circumstances, where it exists *in* you and *as* you. Through your challenges, efforts, successes, and even apparent failures, you are meant to learn about life and apply what you've learned.

You are meant to evolve into greater understandings and expressions as you become more spiritually aware, happy, kind, intelligent, wise, liberated, and enlightened.

The process of spiritual evolution is not about trying to become something other than who you are; rather, your spiritual journey ultimately brings you back in tune with the great soul that you always have been and will always be.

Spiritual evolution takes place right in the midst of all the experiences and circumstances of your life. Regardless of who you are, where you are, and what you do or don't have, you are on a spiritual journey. Within this journey, your responsibility is to uplift and refine what you think, feel, and give in response to whatever experiences are given to you.

Spirituality in Action

A contemplation of waking up

Imagine that you're in the middle of a dramatic dream, in which you have completely forgotten who you really are. In the dream, you're a criminal, wanted by the law in 12 states. You're on the run as thousands of lawmen and civilians try to secure a big reward that has been placed on your head, "dead or alive." How are you going to escape? How are you going to become free? Will it help if you work really hard to study all the maps and research data in the dream library within your dream world? Will freedom come through prayer to a big statue that has appeared in the dream under the name, "The Great Wazzoo?" Will you be able to buy your freedom with more dream cash? Not necessarily.

What is most needed in this seemingly impossible situation is for you — the you that you think you are in the dream — to wake up. You have to let go of those dream-bound thoughts, identifications, habits, desires, and attachments, and awaken to your true nature. In fact, one could even say that your dream-self will make the ultimate sacrifice and face total dissolution and "death" in the process of waking up.

After you awaken, safe and snug in your bed with your dog fast asleep at your feet, you contemplate: "What was that all about?" Did the criminal and all those circumstances really exist, or were they just a symbolic illusion, perhaps representing a subconscious desire to feel more "wanted"? The circumstances certainly *felt* real, but everything is so different now as you rest safely in your bed. It's almost as though you've been re-born from the false dream into a higher waking world where you realize, at last, who you really are. (At least until you awaken from *this* dream!)

Life is a school for the soul

Spiritual Wisdom

If two angels were sent down from heaven — one to conduct an empire, and the other to sweep a street — they would feel no inclination to change employments.

—Isaac Newton

Spirituality views this world as a school for the soul, filled with events and experiences that can bring spiritual growth. Each person lives within a tapestry of lessons: societal lessons, cultural lessons, family lessons, and personal lessons.

You've taken birth as a human being in today's world with your individual circumstances, thoughts, emotions, and perceptions, because these conditions are the ones you need to experience in order to learn lessons that are necessary for your personal evolution.

A "soul lesson" isn't something that a conglomerate of educators has conspired to force you to do so that you'll pass some kind of standardized "no human being left behind" test. Regardless of whether you get the answer "right" or "wrong" on your soul tests, you can still achieve spiritual growth, which is the greater goal of this school for the soul called life.

Don't Forget

From a spiritual point of view, the circumstances and lessons of your life are designed by this intelligent universe to teach, test, refine, strengthen, purify, bless, and enlighten you.

The immediate outer result of a life test is less important than the inner transformation and growth you experience by going through it. Even so-called "failures" can end up being fruitful tests when they inspire you to explore your personal nature and become more aware of universal laws.

For example, if you meet apparent failures with a combination of self-respect, remorse, and a resolve to improve your responses in the future, then those apparent failures may become the seeds of great success.

Sometimes the best spiritual growth comes from circumstances that challenge you to respond in increasingly higher, clearer, and better ways than you may have in previous situations. Therefore, even if you appear to fail a particular life test, you can still be grateful to the test for revealing what you have to do in order to grow and move on. After all, you can't fix a leaky pipe until you find the break.

The basics: Be good, be happy

You already know the basics of living a good spiritual life: Be a nice person, help others, do unto others as you would have them do unto you, respect yourself, be loving, be happy, have fun, let your kindness shine forth, act with integrity, be honest, say what you think and mean what you say, don't be too serious, appreciate everything in life, don't succumb to boredom, greed, jealousy, or the other inner enemies, realize that every moment is sacred and filled with amazing and infinite wonders, be content with your share, give generously to others, be free with yourself, see everyone as a spark of God, give your all to everything you do, and always chuckle inside at the whole cosmic joke of it all. Okay, you can put the book down now.

Just kidding — I'm only getting started! Be nice to your spouse and children, have compassion for those who are suffering, respect the great ones who have given their lives to serve God, eat healthy food, don't indulge your senses too much, spend some time alone with your own thoughts, make decisions that will benefit all concerned, and last but not least, seek ye first the kingdom of God and all things will be added unto you.

Of course, the challenge is to seek ye first the kingdom of God when it's November 1, and you don't have the money for November's rent yet! You may wonder, "Where are all those things that are supposed to be added unto me?" And believe it or not, it can be just as much of a challenge to seek ye first the kingdom of God when everything has already been added unto you. You may be feeling a bit overindulgent, overly secure, and perhaps not quite so humble and may not really think you still need to seek first the kingdom. This play is so mysterious and complex, with twists and turns all along the way!

Finding the hidden gems

Spirituality in Action

Here's a chance to contemplate how to learn the soul lessons inherent in challenging situations, using the example of a situation that is challenging you right now.

- 1. Start by thinking about a circumstance that is currently challenging you.** Remember and think about all the details of the situation.
- 2. Try to imagine yourself in God's place.**

Rise above your own limited self-concept and move into a bird's eye view of your life. See the patterns and lessons you've already been through, your goals and aspirations, and your various personal qualities, and ask yourself this question: If you were the omnipotent, benevolent lord of the universe, why would you be creating this scenario for yourself? What lessons could you be trying to teach this beloved person (you)?

3. **Remember other similar challenges you've had in the past.** What benefits came from those difficult times? What changes did you make based on lessons learned? What strengths did you gain from persevering through previous obstacles? It's not always easy to see the possible benefits of a difficult situation while you're in it, but memory and hindsight are two of the great gifts of human life. You may even want to write about these previous experiences to help you distill more insights from them.
4. **Imagine your current troublesome circumstance as a piece that fits perfectly within a great puzzle and consider how this challenging circumstance may fit in with the rest of your personal history and future goals.** Are there parallels to situations that have happened before, even during your childhood? Could the current challenge be giving you one more opportunity to tap into deeper resources of courage, faith, strength, intelligence, humility, or discipline? Approaching your challenges with a positive attitude may also help to improve them.
5. **Ask for grace in whatever context this is comfortable for you — from your own self, from God, Allah, Krishna, Jesus, the Higher Power — you get the idea!** Asking for grace is one of the most powerful tools you have for attracting blessings to yourself and others.

Where Will You Go Next?

When we have done all the work we were sent to Earth to do, we are allowed to shed our body, which imprisons our soul like a cocoon encloses the future butterfly.

—Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, M.D.

Spirituality in Action

Food for your quest

Even the smallest moments in life can be food for your spiritual quest, nourishment for your personal growth, and a chance to observe and contemplate life. For example, if you're waiting to renew your license at the Department of Motor Vehicles, and the long line is moving very slowly, you can use that time to notice the variety of people around you, or to witness how you feel when you're getting impatient or cranky. See whether you can change an irritation into a happy moment. Smile at someone, get to know your neighbor in line, or sit or stand peacefully, observing your breath and savoring your own experience of spirit in the midst of this busy public place.

Have you lived before? Where will you go next? Will you still exist when your body dies? If so, will you remember then who you are now? Is there anything you can do now to prepare for your inevitable time of departure?

Most religious theories suggest that after the physical death of your body, your soul continues on in a purer form of some kind. Some traditions teach that you will either go to heaven or to hell after you die, depending on how you've acted or whether you've declared a specific kind of commitment to the prophet or teachings of that religion.

Spiritual Wisdom

Pope John Paul II beautifully described heaven as “neither an abstraction nor a physical place in the clouds, but that fullness of communion with God, which is the goal of human life.”

The Pope then went on to describe hell as, “the state of those who freely and definitively separate themselves from God, the source of all life and joy.”

Many traditions, including Hinduism, Buddhism, Kabbalah, and Greek Orthodox Gnosticism, say that after death, your soul — the background of who you really are beneath the appearances of who you seem to be — goes through various stages and levels of other worldly planes before returning back to earth and taking birth once again in a human form, or perhaps even into other nonhuman realms.

In most of these reincarnation theories, your soul is said to carry with it subtle impressions that have been created by your thoughts, experiences, and actions from this and previous lifetimes. These impressions are said to travel with your soul from one life to another, where they affect every aspect of your life until they're balanced or dissolved through a combination of right action and divine grace. (Find more about these subtle impressions and the laws of karma that create them in Chapter 15.)

Group lessons

One example of a group lesson for today's cultures, countries, and the whole of humanity is to be living on a planet upon which so many fellow human beings are starving and suffering. With all the wealth circulating in this world, there is no logical excuse for having so many people starving to death. According to World Bank statistics, nearly half of the world's population lives in poverty, earning less than two dollars a day. And according to a United Nations report, on this very same planet, 2 percent of all adults own half of the world's household wealth — with many storing away much more money than they could ever possibly use, even in many lifetimes. The lessons and tests inherent in this situation are obvious once you look at them with a bit of objectivity.

Imagine hearing that a planet has been discovered where a small percentage of the inhabitants had an abundance of tangible properties and massive amounts of wealth that they left unused in electronic bank storehouses, while their planetmates — brothers, sisters, mothers, fathers, daughters and sons around their world — were dying of starvation, drought, and easily curable illnesses. What would you think of such a planet?

Befriending death

Spiritual Wisdom

One definite thing in life is that everyone is going to die. No one can escape this reality. The only difference is that some people die a little sooner and some a little later. The doctor dies as well as the patient. The king dies as well as the servant. This is a place where everyone dies.

—Sri Ravi Shankar

The death of your body is inevitable. Therefore, the truly intelligent thing to do is to acknowledge and contemplate that which you know is going to happen one day. Thinking about death isn't a gruesome task, but a realistic one! Remembering that your journey in this world will end one day does the following:

- Helps you to see beyond the materialistic level of life
- Inspires you to be generous with whatever you have while you're here
- Makes it easier for you to let go of ego and false pride
- Inspires you to bring more spirituality to your life
- Allows you to appreciate the preciousness of each moment

Once you've accepted the cycles of life and death, you also don't feel too upset when your body starts to age. Instead of thinking of them as "gray hairs," call them "silvery wisdom hairs". Look at those budding wrinkles as beautiful mountain ranges forged from the bounty of your life. When the time comes that your body isn't able to do all it once could, spend more time in quiet communion with spirit. As death approaches, make peace with everyone and everything in this world and pack your bags for the next journey, wherever it may take you.

Consider

Remembering that your loved ones will be gone one day can also help you to cherish every precious moment you have in their company. Don't wait until people die to appreciate them!

Don't Forget

Many great sages have suggested that seekers of truth should remember their eventual death. Here are more benefits that remembrance of death can bring to your life:

- When you remember death, you're better able to maintain a big-picture perspective that keeps you from getting as easily bogged down by insignificant, temporary details. As they say, you "don't sweat the small stuff."

- When your self-identification has expanded through remembrance of death, the insufferable ego isn't as a big problem anymore. (See Chapter 3 for more about ego.)
- Remembering death ironically holds a secret key to the fountain of immortality, because it urges you to discover and identify with your deeper self — the part of you that can never really die. As you become more comfortable with the idea of death, you may also become aware of an essence within yourself that's beyond birth and death, which is quite a perk!

For these reasons and more, you should make peace with the idea of death. After all, one year must die so the next can come forth. One blossom of a tree must wilt before another can spring to life. The *Bhagavad Gita*, a profound scripture from India, states quite simply that “for the inevitable thou should not grieve.” Doesn't this make sense? What better way to set yourself up for unhappiness than to fear and despise what is unavoidable? What if death ends up being the best thing that has ever happened to you — a fulfillment of dreams you never even dared to dream?

The most amazing thing

Once, in olden times, a king asked his prime minister, “What is the most amazing thing in this world?” You see, kings actually had wise men in those nonpartisan days, of whom they could ask such questions.

The king probably expected his prime minister to point to one of the elements that make up this world, or perhaps to describe a more subtle quality like love or beauty as the most amazing thing in this world. Instead, he replied, “O king. The most amazing thing in this world is that every day we see people around us dying, and we know that every single person has to leave this world one day. Yet, each person acts as though he is going to live forever. That is the most amazing thing in this world.”

In spite of all this wisdom about accepting and valuing one's death, being okay with death still isn't so popular on the funeral circuit. Of course, when someone you love leaves this world, you will inevitably feel sad. At the same time, while everyone is moaning about how terrible it is that the person is gone, or saying things like, “He was too young to go,” one spiritual practice is to stay centered in your higher awareness of universal perfection and to remember that from a universal perspective, nobody is too young to go. In this world, lives come and go like waves moving to the shore and then retreating back into the great ocean of spirit.

Don't Forget

Even when someone you love dies and you're experiencing sorrow and grief over the loss, you can maintain a peaceful composure about their death, while still experiencing and honoring your other emotions of sadness and loss.

Also, remember that your feelings of sadness over losing a loved one are really reflections of the joy and love you experienced with the person while they were alive. See the love behind your sadness and feel gratitude for the gift of their presence in your life.

Contemplating what is valuable

What would your life look like if you really acted from the understanding that you will be leaving this world one day? What in your life will keep its value past the threshold of death? What is most important in life? Money? Success? Relationships?

According to sages from a mystical branch of Islam called Sufism, the only things you bring with you into the "next world" are the thoughts, actions, and feelings you have cultivated during this life. Certainly, you won't be able to bring your bank account along!

A great way to contemplate what is most valuable is to imagine that you are at your last moment of life. You're about to leave this world, and with the profound shock and sentiment that often comes at such times, you take a fresh look at yourself and your life as a finite expression that has a beginning, middle, and now, an end.

What did you do during your life that feels most right? How did you help others during your time here? Were you honest? Kind? Did you explore courageously and dance enthusiastically? Did you rise up from mistakes and traumas by choosing a positive approach?

Contemplate what is most valuable in your life, and while you are still here, strengthen, increase, and expand whatever it is.

Spiritual Wisdom

When I arrived in this world, I was crying, and everyone else was laughing; and when I left this world, I was laughing and everyone else was crying!

—Kabir

Consider

If you're looking for an intricate spiritual view of death, one classic text is the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, which is often recited by lamas or Buddhist priests over a dying or recently deceased person.

This text is meant to give guidance on preparing for and going through the various intermediate states of consciousness that a soul passes through between lives.

Spiritual Wisdom

Preparing for your last moment

Some spiritual teachings say that your thoughts and state of mind at the moment of death are what determine where you will go next. In fact, some have suggested that your entire lifetime of spiritual effort is meant just to prepare you to think spiritual thoughts during the “deciding moment” that comes when you reach the threshold of death. The Sufi poet Jelalud'Din Rumi poetically described this moment of decision as, “A century’s worth of work, for one chance to surrender.”

The Indian sage, Sri Ramakrishna, explains how ongoing spiritual practices prepare you to remember higher spiritual ideas during your important last moment of life:

“The soul reincarnates in a body of which it was thinking just before its last departure from this world. Devotional practices may therefore be seen to be very necessary. When, by constant practice, no worldly ideas arise in the mind, then the god-idea alone fills the soul, and does not leave it even when on the brink of eternity.”

Death: Period or comma?

What will happen to you after you die? According to some philosophers, when your body leaves, you will disappear with it. Poof. Gone. Story over.

This possibility is perfectly logical from the standpoint of a materialistic view of life. When an apple falls from a tree and another apple grows in its place, there’s no reason to assume that the spirit of the first apple is either enjoying harp music in the land of “apple heaven” or broiling in some big oven of damnation with other bad apples. Nor is there any reason to assume that the first apple has now come back to life as another new apple.

Most religions suggest that where your soul goes after death depends on how you’ve behaved during your life — with your past actions deciding, for example, whether you’ll burn in eternal flames or float with angels above the clouds.

Consider

While many religions posit these kinds of reward and punishment afterlife scenarios, some eastern philosophies suggest that your experience after death may be influenced less by what you’ve done and more by what you think, or more specifically, what you identify with in your last moments of life.

From the view of this theory, when death comes knocking, your next experience depends on what you are identifying with. If you've lived your life being completely unaware of your greater spiritual nature and identifying solely with your body and outer set of circumstances, well, then, "Buh-bye."

If, on the other hand, you've made good spiritual use of your time here and have traveled one of the many paths that lead to experiencing the eternal nature beyond your personal physical circumstances, then you just may have more to look forward to. Most likely, the experience of expanding into your eternal nature after the physical body's death would feel less like a brand new experience and more like remembering that you've always been eternal and immortal, and that you still are.

Spiritual Wisdom

The Self is not born, nor does he die. He springs from nothing and becomes nothing. Unborn, permanent, unchanging, primordial, he is not destroyed when the body is destroyed.

—Katha Upanishad

Some spiritual teachers describe human life as the universal soul descending from its lofty universal state into form, perhaps to have a bit of human-on-earth-style fun. Maybe the great formless Soul gets a hankering for some delicious food or other sense pleasures, or decides to manifest in human form to see what's going on in this neck of the universe. And a neck it becomes — or more like a noose around his neck.

How death is like leaving a tough job

You can think of leaving this world (a.k.a. dying) as being similar to leaving a really tough job with coworkers you've gotten to know fairly well. You may be happily moving on to a much better job, or you may be upset, thinking that you're being fired or forced to leave and not knowing what will happen next as you leave the security of this steady but tough job.

The people you've worked with may also feel sad or upset about losing your presence and skills, as they hold a goodbye party to bid a fond farewell to their dearly departing officemate.

Now, just imagine that a few weeks later you find yourself preparing to begin a dream job that is better than you could ever have imagined. With the happiness you find in your new life, you may not even want to leave the new job long enough to go back to the old place, even to visit or reminisce with your old friends.

You may experience this same kind of freedom from past attachments and interests when you leave the steady but tough job of living in this physical world. In both cases, you have to let go of the old to welcome the unknowable new.

Some Indian scriptures describe this idea of the divine manifesting as a human being in colorful metaphorical stories of gods taking form as human beings for a specific purpose, but then forgetting who they really are and getting trapped in the usual physical plane illusions that spring forth from ignorance and forgetfulness of our eternal nature. Sometimes spiritual concepts are best expressed through such metaphors.

Here's an analogy that compares your life to the structure of a tree: Imagine that you're a huge tree, but that you've forgotten the bigger picture of yourself as being the whole tree and have instead started to identify with being only a single leaf on the tree. Of course, it's true that you *are* that leaf, but you're much more than just the one leaf.

- If, at the moment the leaf dies and falls to the ground you continue to identify with being only that single leaf, then you'll be gone with the leaf, biodegrading into small particles around the roots of the tree.
- If, on the other hand, you remember — before, or at least right at the moment the leaf is falling off the tree — that you are really the whole tree, including all the leaves, fruits, branches, trunk, and roots, then the leaf's death is no more significant than losing a few hairs during a good shampoo (which admittedly can be traumatic for some!)

Another metaphor for the process of death is the experience of waking up from a dream. During a dream, you may experience yourself as a very different person who is living in circumstances unlike those of your waking state. Yet, when you awaken from this dream, all those people and circumstances that seemed to exist, including the “dream you,” exist no more. This common scenario of dying to a dream can give you another way to contemplate your real life death.

Question: When you awaken from a dream, do you die?

Answer:

- **Yes, you die.** If you've become identified with the dream character and circumstances, then however much you've become identified, that's how much you'll cease to exist when the dream is over.
- **No, you don't die.** If you stayed lucid during your dream and remembered that you are actually the one having the dream rather than just the characters and circumstances appearing in the dream, then you continue to exist beyond the dream.

Now, you can apply this dream identification scenario to the death of your body from this world:

- As much as you identify with your body, that's how much you'll disappear when it dies.
- If, through spiritual efforts and grace, you experience yourself as existing beyond the limited identification with your body — to that degree you continue to exist.

Reincarnating all over again

Spiritual Wisdom

It is absolutely necessary that the soul should be healed and purified, and if this does not take place during its life on earth, it must be accomplished in future lives.

—Saint Gregory of Nyssa

Do you want to come back again?

How do you feel about the possibility of coming back to earth again and again in different forms and circumstances? Does it sound exciting? Exhilarating? Exhausting?

Buddhist and Hindu sages suggest that the ultimate goal of life is to achieve a state of enlightenment where you don't have to keep coming back and going through all this rigmarole of lifetime after lifetime. The idea is to transcend the cycles of birth and death, which are fraught with limitation and suffering, and to move on to a higher level that is somehow better, more pure, and more complete.

As with any theory, this one can also be distorted by human tendencies to simplify and emotionalize spiritual topics with the usual approaches of desire and greed. When I lived in an Indian-based ashram, people would often say things like, "I'm not coming back!" meaning that, within the context of reincarnation, they were not signing on for another tour of duty in this world (clearly forgetting that the "rebirth draft" is alive and well!) One fellow ashramite who was a free-spirited video producer from Canada used to buck this trend and say, "I can't *wait* to come back! I'm having so much fun here. I want to have more fun."

I thought this fellow sounded a lot more enlightened than the people who were so insistent on moving out of the human realm of experience, although I also identify with the desire to move into higher realms. Still, instead of defiantly declaring, "I'm not coming back!" I tend to think more along the lines of, "I do my best, and God's will be done."

Some religious traditions describe a person's life as being one card within a much larger hand of cards. This idea of reincarnation has been prevalent in many cultures, including most eastern religions and some early forms of Judaism and Christianity. Reincarnation has also been researched in scientific studies of young children who seem to have reported accurate details of previous lives.

The basic idea of reincarnation is that a soul takes birth in many increasingly evolved levels of form, beginning perhaps with a rock or plant and moving through the kingdom of life until that soul is lucky and evolved enough to score a human form. Then the soul takes form as a series of increasingly evolved human beings until it graduates to the next level. Most philosophies aren't too specific about what happens after this point due to the inherent difficulty in knowing or writing about nonmaterial realms.

Generally, this idea of finishing up one's time in this world and moving into the next realm is considered a good thing. In the mundane perspective, there are good days and bad days, pleasure and suffering. As Einstein has pointed out, everything is relative. To a spoiled person, a broken fingernail can be the cause of great emotional distress, while to a starving child, a small crust of bread can bring incredible happiness.

However, from the perspective of some spiritual sages, this entire realm of human existence is inherently painful. It's based on ignorance of one's true nature. It's a prison for the bird of the soul that longs to fly free, unencumbered by the chains of worldliness.

In esoteric Judaism, the concept of reincarnation is called *gilgul hánéshamot*, which literally translates as the recycling or transmigration of souls. This teaching describes reincarnation as being like the flame of one life candle lighting another.

The essence of the second flame comes from the first, and contains imperfections inherited from the initial flame that are meant to be corrected. However, the second flame is also an independent entity that is separate from the first.

Some have asked me whether I believe in reincarnation. In my personal philosophy, I tend to hold many theories in my mind, without subscribing fully to any one of them.

I "know that I don't know," and prefer to contemplate and consider different ideas that may even seem contradictory unless you see them as puzzle pieces in a big, multidimensional universe.

From that bigger picture, I tend to think of reincarnation theories as being useful but almost as limited as the usual one-life-per-person scenarios. The idea of reincarnation can be valuable in contemplating the nature and experiences of your life, and at the same time, it is also bound by materialistic limitations of separateness and time, portraying a separate soul as moving forward in time on the same planet, dimension, and level of species.

Reincarnation theories also don't address the spiritual descriptions of this world as being an illusion or dream of the great universal dreamer. In that theoretical view, even the apparently solid histories of people and events in this life dream are made of nothing but illusion. Therefore, any attempts to determine exactly how this illusion of life is structured from within the illusion are inherently incomplete at best.

A Jewish story about reincarnation

Once, on Rosh Hashanah night, the soul of a dead man came to Reb Yekhiel. The apparition appeared exactly as the man had been on earth, and Reb Yekhiel immediately recognized him as the soul of the cantor who used to chant so beautifully from the Torah scroll during the Sabbath services in Reb Yekhiel's town. "What are you doing here on this most holy of nights?" the rabbi asked the dead man.

"Surely the holy rabbi already knows," the soul replied. "On Rosh Hashanah, God himself opens the Book of Life, and judges the whole world. All of the deeds of everyone on earth are clearly written in that Book, in every tiny detail. God looks at our sins and our good deeds and weighs them both in the balance. Who shall live and who shall die? Who shall be born — and to which family? During this night, souls are also judged to be reincarnated once again. I am just such a soul, about to be reborn."

"So tell me," the rabbi asked, "why are you being sent down into the physical world again?"

"It is written in the Zohar that when God desires to take back a person's spirit, then all the days that he has lived in this world pass in review before him," the soul replied, "and this is exactly what happened to me. Just before my death, I recited the confessional, as every Jew is supposed to do, and I thought over everything I had done. Then my entire life passed before me — and I saw that in every instance, I had acted in exactly the right way. My whole life had been totally kosher and totally good. When I realized this, a great feeling of egotistical pride came over me. As luck would have it, right in the middle of this feeling, I died, with no time to repent of that sinful pride.

"When I arrived at the Heavenly Court, that sin of pride was still clinging to me like a soiled coat. And because of that sin, the Heavenly Court decreed that I must return to earth once more, in order to atone for my pride." With that, the apparition vanished.

A guided tour through an experience of death

Try this contemplation, but don't really die while reading it!

You're sitting, reading a wonderful book about spirituality, when suddenly, unexpectedly, you feel a pain in your chest and fall to the ground. At first, you have a sense of shock, but then a warm comforting feeling comes over you. You feel light and buoyant, as you rise up softly from the ground without making any effort to move your muscles.

This sensation feels somewhat familiar, yet you're experiencing some confusion about what exactly is happening. Floating above your physical body, you realize that you have stepped out of that body as you may have disrobed after a long night of dancing. The body that you thought was "you" is now lying on the ground, without you.

The most amazing part of this experience is not the realization that you're not the body, but realizing that you weren't aware of this fact throughout your life. You — the you that you are right now — know this as the most obvious truth. You aren't the body, and you never were. You have known this before. How did you forget again and again? You almost want to laugh at yourself for being so silly. You're now able to understand so much more about life than you had ever imagined.

You feel as though you've awakened from a dream that was filled with delusions and misunderstandings. "How could I have forgotten again?" you cry — not out loud but with your entire being. You no longer have the use of your physical body's organs of expression or perception, yet you're still able to perceive and express.

You don't know whether to laugh or cry. You look down at your body and see it lying there, unconscious. You have a tenderness toward it — a recognition of the heart, a reminiscent interest that one would have upon seeing an old childhood house or a favorite toy of the past that you've outgrown.

Your soul begins to rise higher and higher, passing easily through floors and ceilings of so-called density. The atoms of these physical obstacles are filled with space through which your subtle body flows like airy liquid flowing around rocks in a babbling brook. You move higher and higher into the sky, through the atmosphere, and into the black of space. You understand that this blackness is the same dark space of consciousness that has always existed within your being.

You're able to see so much light and energy scintillating through this so-called blackness. As you move into this mass of light, you feel the particles of your being pulled apart as they expand to fill the entire space. This happens so quickly and smoothly that you would never have imagined how naturally you could fill the entire universe.

For the first time, you truly understand spiritual teachings that you'd heard during your time on earth: "I and my Father are one." "Thou art That." "I am Brahman (the universal absolute)." "The Kingdom of God lies within you."

Your knowledge expands to fit into the universal knowledge, just as a hand fits into the perfect glove. Your limited powers expand back into their universal powers. Your limited ability to do or not do some things expands into perfect omnipotence. Your limited knowledge becomes omniscient universal awareness. The time and space you had lived in is now revealed to be merely a construct of the mind, as you become all-pervasive and eternal.

Without ears, you hear divine music — the music of the spheres — being played inside of you. Your will is merged and enfolded into the Universal Will, just as a drop of maple syrup merges into a full glass of water. One drop fills the entire glass. You are free! You fly unencumbered, moving through the space of universal consciousness without moving at all, because you already fill the entirety of creation. This experience is what the Indian scriptures refer to as *Sat-chit-ananda*: perfect existence (*sat*), consciousness (*chit*), and bliss (*ananda*). *Sat* also means truth — truth and existence. You now know that ultimate truth flows, and forever has and will flow through all existence. Existence itself is truth.

You have become the great power and truth of this universe. All is well. All is as it should be right now — and right now is all there is. There is nothing to ask for, nothing to do. There is only the awareness of *I am*. Instead of the pulsing of blood running through your veins, there is a throb of "I am, I am, I am," pulsating through your entire universal being. Take a moment and rest in this infinite space.

Now, remember that you are still here in this physical world, reading this book and quite alive in your body.

Look at your life and your priorities with this heightened understanding. Infuse your life with the existence, consciousness, and bliss that you were imagining just moments ago.

Bring the light of this higher awareness into the situations you face. Bring detachment and reality back into the circumstances of your life. Bring your free spirit back with you. Know that you can soar through these high spaces even within your own body.

Never forget: That higher experience is you. Thou art *That* — no matter what! Thou art *That* even if you get into an argument with someone or make a mistake and then feel guilty. Thou art *That* even if you have bad habits and bad manners or good habits and good manners. Those are just mental images projected onto the movie screen of this world. The truest part of you can sit back and watch, enjoying the show — laughing with yourself, crying with yourself, but always knowing that when the show is over you get to come home.

Famous last words

Here are some inspiring words spoken during the last moments of life by insightful folks:

- "The hour I have long wished for is now come." —Teresa of Avila
- "I have been dying for twenty years, now I am going to live."
—James D. Burns
- "Let us cross the river and rest in the shade." —Stonewall Jackson
- "If this is death, it is easier than life." —Robert Louis Stevenson
- "I go from a corruptible to an incorruptible crown, where no disturbance can take place." —Charles I of England (last words on the scaffold)
- "Dying is a wild night and a new road." —Emily Dickinson
- "This is the last of earth! I am content." —John Quincy Adams
- "I shall hear in heaven."
—Ludwig van Beethoven (who was deaf)
- "I am going to that country which I have all my life wished to see."
—William Blake
- "If I had the strength to hold a pen, I would write down how easy and pleasant it is to die."
—William Hunter
- "It is very beautiful over there," —Thomas Edison