

## ***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.