

When a Man Dies, Shall He Live Again? by Annie Besant

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[Page 1] I HAVE taken as the title of this lecture a famous and well-known question: "*When a man dies, shall he live again?*" Yet we, as Theosophists, should at once traverse that question by saying that the man never dies. The form in which this question is phrased is, of course, well-known, although that conception of man as being subject to death is as false as anything can possibly be. If you look at death as a gateway separating one world from another, then you may truly say that a man passes through the gateway of death. But the man himself does not die; and when we speak of a man dying, it reminds one of another phrase, the question: "Has man a soul?" which is couched on very much the same idea of a man: That he is a body and has a soul — whereas the true view of a man is that he is a soul and has a body; the body being simply a passing incident in his everlasting life. So that my very first statement with regard to death will be a negation of part of the title. The man does not live again, he is ever living, and death has no power to take away from him the life which is inherent in his nature.

This question as to the life on the other side of death is one of perennial interest, and when we [Page 2] remember that death is certain to each of us it is strange how little many of us know what lies on the other side. While the religions of the world have always spoken of the life beyond death's gateway, they have rarely given any definite information about it, and for the great majority death hides an unknown country. Now surely that ought not to be so. Surely a condition into which we are passing by thousands day by day ought to be a condition of which some definite knowledge can be gained. And we find, when we look at the religions of the world, that their founders have always been people who have claimed to possess first-hand knowledge of what lies beyond death. It is said of the Founder of the Buddhist faith that He remarked that if you ask a man the way to a particular village, who has never been to that village, he cannot accurately describe to you the road; and that it is useless to ask a man who has never visited them about the other worlds. And He went on to say that He Himself knew those worlds as the people around Him knew their own villages, and, knowing the worlds beyond death, He was able to tell them of the way, and of the happenings in those worlds. But He is by no means alone in that claim. The early teachers of Christianity, you will find, speak in a similar way of exact knowledge; and they have the idea, in common with other religions, that a man can separate soul and body during his physical life, and that death should not be the first time in which body and soul are consciously separated from each other. Nay, in some of the religions of the world people go much further, and say that every night of our lives we leave our body when we go to sleep, and that sleep is nothing more than the process of the man leaving the physical body, and that death is nothing more than a sleep, the only difference between sleeping [Page 3] and dying being that in the sleep of death the man does not return after he has left the body, and that the link between the body and the man is broken which remains unbroken during sleep. And if the people realize that, something of the fear which presses on many people with regard to the act of dying will pass away. If people realize that they are continually going through that experience of parting soul and body, then the fear of the mere act of dying would entirely pass away. As a matter of fact there is no suffering in death. Even in the case of the sudden striking away of the physical body there is no suffering. And that is not simply the testimony of those who speak from occult investigation; for questions addressed to people who have met with very serious accidents, which have left them senseless (so that if they had truly passed away from the body they would have passed on to the other side without again coming into

physical life), have elicited the reply that so far as the blow that struck them senseless was concerned there was no kind of pain. These answers confirm the testimony of the occult student, that the mere act of dying is unaccompanied with pain.

Passing from that, let us ask whether there is any difference, and if so what, between sleep and death. There is a slight difference, but not one in which feeling is mixed up at all. When you go to sleep, the soul leaves the body, clothed in what we call the astral body, a body of much subtler material than the physical. Now in death there is a slight difference; for in the process of dying the subtler part of the physical body (which we call the *etheric double*) is separated from the denser part, and this does not normally happen when a person goes to sleep; although it occurs in cases of trance, whether it be [Page 4] under chloroform, ether, mesmeric influence, or in the trance which is connected with mediurnship. Where a medium goes into trance, this separation of the dense and etheric parts of the physical body takes place, and the latter serves as the basis for materializations. In this, again, there is no pain.

The evidence with regard to the life after death which it is most easy for the enquirer to obtain is that which comes along the line of spiritualistic investigation; and although I am not a spiritualist, and consider that along that line there are certain dangers to be carefully guarded against, still it would not be right to speak on evidence available on this subject without acknowledging the enormous debt that everyone owes to the spiritualistic investigators, for the way in which they have made available evidence which appeals to the majority of people through the physical senses. There are a large number of people who will only recognize a fact when the fact carries with it some physical demonstration, and I venture to say that everyone who has looked carefully and at first hand into spiritualistic evidence will be ready to say that even when you have put on one side every case where challenge may fairly be made, there remains an irreducible minimum of fact which it is impossible to deny. For I find the people most positive that there is no evidence to be found in Spiritualism are mostly those who have not taken the trouble to investigate. Along this line, then, may be obtained evidence addressed to the physical senses, and I do not know any other way along which such evidence can be obtained: because when you are going to deal with conditions in which the physical body has been dropped, the only way of gaining evidence appealing to the physical [Page 5] body of others is by persuading the entity who has dropped his body to utilize the body of someone else. And for those who are purely materialists, I can conceive no better first step in the direction of certainty than that which they may gain from a carefully chosen spiritualistic séance; and, for those who do not want to investigate personally, there is available literature of the most satisfactory character; and any one who will read Sir William Crookes' investigations, and see the scientific character of the tests to which he submitted his phenomena, will, if human testimony is to be regarded as valuable, be prepared to accept that as a proof of survival after death.

Now and then the complaint is made that certain conditions are not imposed. But those who know anything of scientific investigations will be aware that no early experiments can be carried on under what are called strict test conditions — for the simple reason that no one knows in the earlier stages of experiments what are the conditions under which successful experiments can take place. No one, when first experiments were made in electrical science, insisted on laying down conditions, and said that no manifestations of electricity could be satisfactory unless they appeared in an atmosphere permeated with moisture ! If that ridiculous condition had been laid down the results would never have appeared. But would that have proved that electrical science was impossible ? Or would it only have shown that it is Nature that lays down the conditions for the happening of phenomena, and that we are to accommodate ourselves to Nature ? Every scientific man knows that he must make his experiments all over the place,

observing everything that happens, until he has found out Nature's conditions; then, conforming himself to those, he can bring about results without fear of failure. [Page 6] I say this in order to defend many unfairly judged people, who are attacked by scientific men in a most unscientific way.

Permit me to repeat here a story which is exceedingly instructive for the scientific man: it is the story of the conditions supposed to be imposed on photography in China, before photography was known there. A photographer is said to have gone into the middle of China, and to have offered to take pictures by sunlight. Everyone laughed at him; for how was it possible for the sun to make pictures? It was clear he was a fool. But further examination into his methods showed that he was less a fool than a knave. The whole of his procedure was an endeavor to delude the people. The first thing he did for his picture making was to put a black cloth over the box! and it was clear he could easily introduce under that cloth any number of pictures ready made. The fact that he insisted on putting it over the camera showed that he desired to cheat. He further insisted on bringing in a closed case, which nobody was allowed to open to see whether pictures were not concealed within. He would not let anyone look at that case to prove there were no pictures there, and he insisted on putting it into the camera under the black cloth. Of course, you can see at once that he cannot make pictures unless he puts them into his little case beforehand, and slips them into the camera when nobody is allowed to look! Clearly he is a fraud. And then, when he pretends he has got his pictures, what does he do? Does he open the box and show them? No; he wraps up his little case in the black cloth and carries it off into a room where no sunlight is allowed to enter, although he pretends he is making the pictures by the sun. As if the sunlight that makes the pictures should not be allowed to enter in at all! [Page 7]

So, in order to prove that he was able to take a picture by sunlight, they laid down as the test conditions that he should do it in an open box, and that everybody might take out and examine his plates to show that there were no pictures concealed. Nor must he go into a dark room, and talk to them about developing. They were far too clever people to be cheated in that barefaced manner, and he was a miserable fraud. Such was the decision; but, of course, under those test conditions they did not get any pictures. Apply that nearer home, and you will find it an exceedingly good illustration of the way in which people who know nothing about the conditions under which phenomena happen, lay impossible conditions down, and then insist on the production of, phenomena.

The Theosophist, however, does not usually make use of Spiritualism for finding out what lies on the other side of death, because he does not think it a good thing for those who are passing onwards to be brought back into the earth-life; it is better for them to lose the clinging to these lower interests, and try to pass on into higher conditions. Moreover, Theosophists do not think the results which are likely to be obtained in this way are results which can be thoroughly reliable. They are not sufficiently wide. Granted that you may receive statements as to what is happening on the other side; but they will, for the most part, be drawn from a comparatively limited circle. And that, I think, is for the very simple! reason that it is only those who are comparatively near to the physical world who can thus return and communicate with those who are still in the body. It is as though you were receiving from people traveling in a foreign land, without introductions (so to speak) to the wider interests of that land, [Page 8] reports from their own narrow circle of experience. They do not furnish us with enough information to give us a definite certainty as to the conditions of the higher planes.

As you probably know, Theosophy says that the best way of finding out what happens on the other side of death is to train yourself to investigate, by yourself leaving your body and passing into those wider

realms, studying the conditions there, and bringing back definite knowledge which may be confirmed by further experiment.

Now what is the first thing that strikes the investigator when he studies the conditions into which he temporarily passes? The first thing that strikes him is that the men and women who pass through death are not changed by the passing; that the mere dropping of the physical encasement has not changed the people themselves. Their affections, their thoughts, their emotions, their interests, are all the same. He is struck with overwhelming force by the continuity of life. We shall be the same on the other side as we are here. Death works no miracle. If a man goes out of the world with all his interests here, with all his passions and appetites potent, all his interests and passions will still be the same when he awakens on the other side. And when that is recognized, we begin to be able to judge our condition there by what we know of our condition here. There is not one of you who could not forecast your experiences there by analyzing the things that interest you most here, and seeing how much of these you can carry to the other side. It is this fact which makes the knowledge of the other side so imperatively necessary for us — for that life is terribly handicapped by the ignorance prevailing amongst the majority of us as to its conditions. [Page 9]

The way in which you pass out of the body conditions your immediate experience on the other side, and for that reason you must thoroughly realize that there is nothing to fear; for that dread which is in men's minds here possesses them on the other side, and makes the first obstacle to peace and happiness that has to be overcome. There is nothing more troublesome on the other side than the state of the people who go out of this life believing in eternal torture. The idea springs up in the mind when they find that they have left the earth: and though there be nothing to justify it, the thought they have carried with them tortures them, until they can be persuaded that it is not true. So that if you can get rid of that idea on this side, you will be taking one step towards truth on the other. I know very well that this nightmare is gradually dying out of popular belief; I know that many Christian clergymen are preaching the gospel of hope instead of the gospel of despair; but still some believe it, and you should get rid of that terrible superstition before you leave the body, so that you may not have that specter to face on the other side of death.

The next thing I must say is that, following out the law which cannot be broken, there is nevertheless in many cases temporary suffering. But no one need go through that suffering unless, by folly here, the conditions are made that assert themselves as suffering there. If you allow your appetites to overcome you, if you live a life of profligacy, gluttony, or drunkenness, or give way to violent passions — if you pass out of the body with those evil things unconquered, it is true that you must suffer for a time on the other side of death. The suffering is inevitable, although not everlasting. It is easily understood. [Page 10] You must have heard sometimes how a drunkard suffers if he cannot obtain strong drink when the moment of craving comes over him. Time after time it is said by the drunkard: "I would break the habit if I could, but when the craving comes it carries me off my feet; the suffering is so terrible that I must satisfy it at all risks". My answer, now that I know what lies on the other side, is clear and simple: "You must face that suffering at one time or another; better face it on this side of death, where every advantage is with you, than on the other side, when the difficulties will be enormously greater. For the body in which the man is living on the other side is composed of much subtler matter, and the same force in the subtler body is very much more effective than when it is moving the heavy physical matter. The same amount of energy has more effective powers as craving, and it cannot be gratified. During my own experience I have known an explanation of this kind given to a drunkard enable him to break the chains of that terrible

habit; for when he once realized that he could not escape the struggle, he fought the battle and killed his enemy on this side of death, instead of leaving the terrible combat to the other side. There you have a means of helping those who are under the chain of some evil physical habit. You can encourage them to break it here, instead of under conditions of keener suffering hereafter. For it must be broken ! Every living soul is essentially divine; and it may not remain in that bondage, tied by the fetters of drunkenness, gluttony, or lust. They are too much against its inherent divine nature; they are too much against the aspirations which no soul, by virtue of its divinity, is utterly without. And every fetter of sense which degrades the soul is better broken off during the physical life than in the post-mortem existence. [Page 11]

The next thing we notice is that a great many people find their life on the other side exceedingly dull for a long time — and that is one of the reasons why they try to get into touch with the earth again. All their interests were here; they had no interests here which they could carry on with them, and the result is they have to wear out the interests, and it takes a very considerable time. Over and over again we notice that souls are held in bondage here by these ties to the earth, instead of passing onwards to conditions far happier. That is, perhaps, the commonest stage on the other side — a period of weariness and of lacking interests. Very much of the help that is given on the other side is given to those who are under these conditions, in persuading them to face for a time the weariness, for the sake of the greater happiness that lies beyond; to work through the tie which they have rendered inevitable, so that they may pass onwards as quickly as may be, and reap the harvest which is waiting for them a little farther on.

The recognition of the law will give you many hints for the choice which you may exercise in this life, especially in your hours of leisure, in utilizing those for the higher part of you and not only for the lower. Out of the many forms of pleasure placed before young men and women, they might well exercise a wise choice, choosing the pleasures that tend rather to elevate the emotions than those which degrade and animalize them. Here, of course, you come into a question of profound interest—the question of the amusements of the great masses of the people. So long as these amusements are of the most trivial and stupid kind; so long as the music offered to them is only music by courtesy, and nothing else; so long as that is what the caterers of amusement [Page 12] offer to the public — you cannot blame those who seek amusement for taking what they can get, if there is nothing else available for them. I am not speaking against amusements which are really a relaxation and not; another form of study, but I *do* say that in those amusements there might be something of beauty, something of art, something of taste, something of refinement, so that young men and women who go into a music-hall should come out of it the better for the amusement and not the worse. You may say: “ What has that to do with the life after death ? A great deal, because all these young people have to pass through that life after death, and they can take with them something that will last. Mere jingle and folly cannot be carried on to that side; but the refining of the emotions which comes from listening to music which may be tuneful, melodious, and beautiful, and yet by no means silly — such an amusement will give them something that they can carry on to that other side. For there also is music, beautiful beyond anything that the earth can give; there also is beauty of the most entrancing kinds; but it is beauty that appeals to the nobler emotions, and those ought to be cultivated on this side of death. Having once gone the round of those amusements myself, in order to see what really did amuse the people, I found there was glad and eager response where some noble or tender sentiment lay beneath the song and the melody; I found that these were more responded to than the mere vulgar rattle, and that there was an answer of the emotional nature where the opportunity for that answer was afforded. When I suggest that it would be well to prepare for life after death I do not mean it in that gloomy sense in which some people say: *Prepare for death*, “Prepare to meet your God”; but I say: Prepare in a rational, thoughtful, sensible manner, and do it [Page 13] by the cultivation of the nobler emotions, and not simply by the satisfaction of the lower animal tastes.

Passing from that kind of preparation, let us see what else we can do to make richer and fuller that life on the other side of death. It is a life of progress. You start where you left this world, but you climb onwards and onwards for long ages of peace and joy. And you progress by that which you take with you as a starting-point; for you cannot make it there fresh starting-points. You can carry on anything you have begun here, but complete initiation of a new line of mental and emotional activity is not possible on the other side of death. You will have as material for your progress, all that you have thought on this side; and if you want to ensure on the other side of death centuries of happy, peaceful progress, now is the time for making the material which will render that progress inevitable. Every great aspiration that for a moment has illuminated your heart, every desire for human service, every kindly wish for the helping of a fellow creature, every hope and struggle and endeavor that you have made for human good, come back to you there as the material out of which your progress will be fashioned. Think what it means ! So many of you have hearts larger than your opportunities, feelings which go beyond your practical capacities. Do not let your heart break, you who are tender to the sorrow of the world. Sympathize as much as you can; feel as much as you can; be sorry for the sorrowful; and do not shrink from the pain of human sympathy. For every feeling that you have had during your earth-life will come back to you in your life in the heavenly places; and you will build it, not into futile hope as you may have thought, but into capacity to achieve; when your time comes to be born again in the world, you [Page 14] will come back to it with your heart and your brain full of schemes for human welfare that you will be able to carry out, every hope turned into a power, and every pulse of sympathy into a faculty to help. Not one throb of sorrow will be lost; you will find it in the treasure-house of heaven to work into power — power to conceive and to bless. That is part of the good news we bring from the other side — and how good it is only those know whose hearts have almost broken in facing the misery of the world. Not one of you need pass through death's gateway without carrying with you material of that splendid kind which, in the heavenly places, you will thus weave into faculty and power.

And so also with every emotion that you have so often on this side of death. Emotions of love give, perhaps, as much pain as pleasure — sometimes even more. Do not shrink from the pain which comes from a noble love, even though it be unrequited. The love of the mother for the son who almost breaks her heart, the love of the father for the daughter who has wandered far from home, the love of husband for wife, or wife for husband, where due return has not been given, the love of friend for friend outliving even neglect and betrayal — those loves come back to us in the higher worlds and enrich and glorify our heaven. For there is not one human soul for whom we have kept our love untouched and unbroken, not one human soul that here we may seem to have lost, that there we shall not find. All souls that love each other find each other out in heaven, for the bond of love is a bond over which the icy hand of death has no power; love is immortal, love is divine; and the son that has broken his mother's heart in his manhood, loved his mother when he was a little boy playing round her knees: and that love-tie is only submerged, and will [Page 15] re-assert itself on the other side of death. So that where your love becomes a pain instead of a joy, cling to it and clasp it to your heart, and it will bring you to the place of joy. And in that world of love and of peace the power to love will grow with the loves which here have been disappointed; and every disappointed love is a jewel which will be worked up into the great mosaic of faculty that we shall make in heaven.

Pass from the emotions that deal with love, and think of the artistic emotions. These are part of the soul and not of the body. There is much frustrated art in this world; so many who can do a little but not much, for lack of faculty; so many with great ambitions and poor achievements; so many who dream more than they can realize. Let them still have the courage and dream on; let them dream of the Beauty that they cannot reproduce, of the Music and the Painting and the Sculpture that only gleam to them in visions,

which their hands are unable to fabricate. The power to achieve will be made from the aspiration. Practice whatever power you have; do not be ashamed of it because it is small; cultivate it, water it, let the sun shine on it: and, in the grander world beyond, that seed of art will flower into genius, and none of the efforts will be wasted.

And not only the emotions, but the intelligence grows there, far more swiftly than it does here. The man who is eager for knowledge but cramped in the narrow conditions of his daily life, shall not he also have his harvest on the other side of death? Only do not let him lose grip of that desire for knowledge; and let him steal day by day out of his busy time, if only a few minutes, in which he may read some great book, in which he may study some great thought. It may not be much, but [Page 16] perhaps even in the omnibus or train, passing between his home and his office, he may be able to snatch a few moments for study. Although he may only read twelve or fifteen lines a day, those lines will multiply week by week, and month by month, and year by year, and that mental accumulation that he has made by his study will be the material with which his intelligence will grow when he passes to the life on the other side of death.

I want you to realize, if possible, how much you can do to make that life a life of progress and of growth. Life here is so narrow and crude. On every side circumstances wall us in, and we realize that there is no possibility of ever climbing those walls. Never mind. Death will knock them down, although you cannot over-climb them. Only keep belief in the divinity of your own nature, and know that you are destined to grow to perfection, and that it is only a question of time when that perfection will show itself to the world. And you can shorten the time by understanding the law; you can prepare for the progress in the heavenly life by utilizing the little fragments of time stolen from the pressure of daily life. And this life will become gladder and stronger when it is full of hope; for no man who has hope can be utterly miserable; and hope will shed its gleams over the greyest life and gild even the clouds that too often gather around us. For the time there is so much more than the time here - hundreds upon hundreds of years there, and here a few score only. We do not really belong here; our world is the heavenly world, and we just come down for a few brief moment's of earth-life to gather what we need for our true life in heaven. You see sometimes a bird whose life is in the air, a bright, radiant creature who soars in the sunshine, drop down from [Page 17] the air to which he belongs into the water, for the purpose of catching the food on which he is to live; and just as the bird's flight in the atmosphere is, compared to the momentary plunge into the ocean in search of food, so is our true life in the world of spirit, compared to this brief dash downwards into the world of matter.

That is the truth as all know it who can see on the other side of death — a great and joyful truth; for that is our world rather than this; and this world is ours for the gathering of experience, or for the doing of service. Those are the two great objects of the earth-life; to gather experience whereby to grow; to do service, which is the element of the Christ-growth. No life is worth the having which is filled only by selfish thought and cold indifference to the wants of the world around. That life only is fit to grow in the heavenly places which is a life of sharing, of giving of everything that one has gathered. And there is this joyous thing about all the real goods of life; the goods of intelligence, of emotion, of art, of love — all the things which are really worth the having — they do not waste in the giving; they grow, the more, the more we give. Those physical things get smaller as we take away from them, leaving so much less for future use; and so, when it is a question of sharing the physical things, men calculate and say: "I have only enough for myself, for my wife, for my child. How can I give any away?" All that is matter is consumed in the using; but that is not true of the higher things, the things of the intelligence, of the heart, and of the Spirit. If I know something, I do not lose it when teach it. Nay! it becomes more truly mine because I have

shared it with one more ignorant than myself; so that [Page 18] you have two people enriched by knowledge, by the sharing of a store that increases, instead of diminishing, as it is shared. And so with all that is worth having. You need not fear to lessen your own possessions by throwing them broadcast to your hungry fellow-men. Give your knowledge, your strength, your love; empty yourself utterly, and when for a moment you think you are empty, then from the inexhaustible fount of love, and beauty, and power, more flows down to fill the empty vessel, making it fuller, and not emptier than it was before.

There is the secret of a useful life; there the inspiration to noble living — nothing that I can win that is worth having, which does not grow as I share it with my fellows. And those who have thus learned, those who see the physical and compare it, worthless as it is, with the emotional, the intellectual, the spiritual, they, and they alone, are wise, and know how to live; and as they live, their lives are a benediction; and when they die, their lives are a continual progress; and when they return, they bring the fruits of the progress to share them also with their fellow-men. And so they learn to be the Servants, the Guides, and the Saviors of the world.