

Life after Life

Dr. Ekta Sawhney

Assistant Professor
 Alliance School of Business
 Alliance University
 Bengaluru

Abstract

Life surrounds us & Death intrigues us. Humans fear the unknown, and so Death scares us. Death is a great mystery for us. We have no idea as to what happens in the afterlife. But there have been instances of people who have made a journey into the other world. They have been through Death. They have had a glimpse of the afterlife and have come back or have been sent back. These people were said to have undergone a Near Death Experience (NDE). When seen from a spiritual angle, a Near Death Experience is the most profound & beautiful experience that the experiencers went through, for it transformed them and made them better humans.

There have been writers and poets who have dwelled on this aspect of human death & the afterlife. Their contention is that though the human body may die, the soul lives on. The paper deals with the concept of a Near Death Experience as a possible explanation to the concept of the immortality of the spirit. It also discusses the exaltation of the concept of Death & Immortality of the soul as exemplified in the works of the great American poetess Emily Dickinson & the Sufi mystic Maulana Jalaluddin Rumi.

Emily Dickinson is regarded as one of America's greatest poets. In her poems she writes mostly about death, immortality, and the afterlife. She believed that the existence of death allows for the existence of life. Maulana Jalaluddin Rumi was a Sufi Mystic who wrote mostly on the theme of Eternal Love. In a strict Sufi fashion, he viewed God as his beloved whom he found in his friend & Guru, Shams e Tabriz. His poems abound in sheer ecstasy in anticipation of his Union with God.

Keywords: *Death, Immortality, Near Death, Sufi, Spiritual*

1. Introduction

Death & Dying are the two phenomenon which have raised people's curiosity since times immemorial. Physical Death is no death, for the soul remains alive, is the concept held by the great seers & mystics. It has also empirically been proven that the body dies, while the soul travels to a new plane of existence. There have been no proper evidence suggesting the

existence or the soul or spirit, but there are certain phenomenon which surely speak of an afterlife.

2. What is an NDE?

A *near-death experience* (NDE) is one such event that may occur to a person who is close to dying. This experience is a powerful one and often leaves strong imprints on the minds of the experimenter. Because it includes transcendental and mystical elements, an NDE is a powerful event of consciousness.

An NDE may begin with an out-of-body experience (OBE), a state in which a person perceives himself to be separate from his body. Some people even observe themselves suspended in the air and floating near their body. People going through an NDE have reported moving into a dark space, into some sort of tunnel, with a gleam of bright light at the far end. Next, they often reach a fantastic landscape and encounter beings that may be perceived as sacred figures, deceased family members or friends, or unknown entities. A pinpoint of indescribable light may grow to surround the person in brilliant but not painful radiance; unlike physical light, it is not merely visual but is sensed as being an all-loving presence that many people define as the Supreme Being of their religious faith.

The concept of an NDE gained popularity by Raymond Moody's 1975 book *Life After Life* and the founding of the International Association for Near-Death Studies (IANDS) in 1981. His books abound chiefly with the experiences reported by individuals who have been close to dying or who have been pronounced clinically dead and then resuscitated. The experiencers have reported that they were declared dead or were close to death – their vital organs had stopped functioning, but they still came back to life. Some come back after minutes and others come back after a much longer time. In one case a person called Mellon-Thomas Benedict came back to life after being clinically dead for an hour and thirty minutes.

Western literature also has account of an NDE which comes from the famed Greek philosopher Plato who, in the year 380 BC, described such an event in the tenth book of his legendary work entitled Republic. Although it is called the "Myth of Er", the word "myth" in this case means "word, speech, account," rather than the modern meaning. The story begins as a man named Er dies in battle. Ten days later, when the bodies of those who died in the battle are collected, Er's body has not decomposed. Two days later he revives on his funeral-pyre and tells others of his journey into the afterlife, including an account of reincarnation and the celestial spheres of the astral plane.

Although there are differences in which people perceive and experience an NDE, many similarities have been noticed in the way in which an NDE take place. People have described similar experiences while going through a near death experience. These are:

- An out of Body experience of floating above and viewing one's physical body and the scene of one's death and overhearing conversations; feelings of peace and quiet; hearing a distant noise.
- Leaving the body behind, entering a dark tunnel, moving through a tunnel towards a light at the end of a tunnel.
- Meeting dead loved ones-past relatives and friends and witnessing beings of light who console and advice.
- Returning to life to complete unfinished work and a deep sadness upon leaving this new dimension (Chakraborty, p25)
- Disappointment on being revived. Often feeling a need to shrink or somehow squeeze to fit back into the physical body. There can be unpleasantness, even anger or tears at the realization they are now back in their bodies and no longer on "The Other Side."

Near Death Experiences are beautiful ways in which we are reminded of the essence of our being. It is a valid proof of the existence of a 'Soul' and an 'Afterlife'. Experiencers have often recounted the feeling of an ineffable 'peace' surrounding them when they go through an NDE. Though they are in awe of their surroundings & the environment, yet they feel as if they have returned home.

This concept of death and dying has been dignified and epitomised in the works of many artists and poets. Death is seen not merely, as a force which ends life, but which heralds a new beginning. The body dies, but the soul lives on, is the commonly accepted view held by most mystics and seers. Some poets have also elaborated on the concept of death and the near death experiences- the coming back of the soul from death.

Emily Dickinson (1830-1886) was an American poet in whose poetry Death itself is immortalised. The way in which the poetess uplifts the spirit of an individual, makes the soul meet Death and announces the kinship between the two, is at once striking & mesmerising.

Over the years her Death poems have been read with great fervour. Death has been given a royal position in her poetry. It is seen as a liberating force which unites the person with the divine and makes him immortal. One of these poems is No., 118, "Tie the Strings to my Life My Lord." In this poem, Emily depicts a person who is ready to go on a long journey, the journey towards eternity. She asks God to tie and close the strings of her life that she has just lived because now, she is moving towards the afterlife, towards infinity.

Tie the Strings to my Life, My Lord,
Then, I am ready to go!
Just a look at the Horses
Rapid! That will do!

Put me in on the firmest side
So I shall never fall
For we must ride to the Judgment
And it's partly, down Hill

Emily says that she doesn't mind that the road to eternity is steep, because going there was her choice & also the will of her Master (God)

But never I mind the steepest
And never I mind the Sea
Held fast in Everlasting Race
By my own Choice, and Thee

Emily is shown to be very excited on thinking of the afterlife. She bids farewell to her earthly life and moves excitedly towards her forever home.

Goodbye to the Life I used to live
And the World I used to know
And kiss the Hills, for me, just once
Then -- I am ready to go!

“On this wondrous sea - sailing silently” depicts the poetess sailing on a boat & moving towards Eternity In the first stanza, Emily seems to call on the sailor and ask him the way to the shore, a place where all the storms & tribulations come to an end. The Sailor replies in the affirmative and says that there are many sails (meaning ‘souls’) resting at the Western shore. It is the land of Eternal rest.

On this wondrous sea - sailing silently -
Ho! Pilot! Ho!
Knowest thou the shore
Where no breakers roar -
Where the storm is o'er?

In the silent West
Many - the sails at rest -
The anchors fast.
Thither I pilot thee -
Land! Ho! Eternity!
Ashore at last!

A Poem where the soul is visualised to be very blissful on meeting with the Divine is Emily Dickinson's “Exultation is the going”.

Exultation is the going
Of an inland soul to sea,
Past the houses
Past the headlands
Into deep Eternity

Here, Emily stresses that the soul will go past the known houses and headlands into unknown territories, the same way as the soul moves through the tunnel in a near death experience.

Bred as we, among the mountains,
 Can the sailor understand
 The divine intoxication
 Of the first league out from Land?

The soul is 'intoxicated', it is in deep bliss in anticipation of meeting with the infinite.

In many faiths Death is seen as a new birth, as the soul regains a new identity and is united with the eternal beloved. Sufism is a way of life in which a deeper identity is discovered and lived. This deeper identity, beyond the already known personality, is in harmony with all that exists. This deeper identity, or essential self, has abilities of awareness, action, creativity and love that are far beyond the abilities of the superficial personality. Eventually it is understood that these abilities belong to a greater life and being which, we individualize in our own unique way while never being separate from it.

Sufism is not a doctrine or a belief than an experience and way of life. It is a tradition of enlightenment that carries the essential truth forward through time. The truth of Sufism requires reformulation and fresh expression in every age.

Jalaluddin Rumi (1207 AD- 1273 AD) was a Persian poet, Sufi mystic & a *dervish*. His poems are known for their depiction of Love for the cosmic beloved, the Creator. Rumi regards Death not as the end but as a rejoicing and joyful occasion because it lets us join with our beloved, it lets one merge with the infinite and merge one's identity with the eternal, everlasting peace.

This blissful meeting with the beloved & faith in the afterlife is aptly described in the poem "The Wedding Night", where Rumi expresses hope in death because it means meeting with his lover and uniting with the beloved. Death is not to be feared, rather, it should be celebrated because it signifies freedom.

The day I've died, my pall is moving on -
 But do not think my heart is still on earth!
 Don't weep and pity me: "Oh woe, how awful!"
 You fall in devil's snare - woe, that is awful!
 Don't cry "Woe, parted!" at my burial -
 For me this is the time of joyful meeting!
 Don't say "Farewell!" when I'm put in the grave -
 A curtain is it for eternal bliss.
 You saw "descending" - now look at the rising!
 Is setting dangerous for sun and moon?

To you it looks like setting, but it's rising;
The coffin seems a jail, yet it means freedom.
Which seed fell in the earth that did not grow there?
Why do you doubt the fate of human seed?
What bucket came not filled from out the cistern? Why should the Yusuf "Soul" then fear this well? Close here your mouth and open it on that side. So that your hymns may sound in Where-no-place.

The phenomenon of Death is seen both as an inescapable reality & as a redeemer as it redeems a person from the sufferings of the living world. The afterlife is exalted & praised again in the poem "Gone to the Unseen".

At last you have departed and gone to the Unseen.
What marvelous route did you take from this world?

Beating your wings and feathers,
you broke free from this cage.
Rising up to the sky
you attained the world of the soul.
You were a prized falcon trapped by an Old Woman.
Then you heard the drummer's call
and flew beyond space and time.

The meeting with God, the divine beloved, is beautifully described as entering a garden of roses,

As a lovesick nightingale, you flew among the owls.
Then came the scent of the rosegarden
and you flew off to meet the Rose. The wine of this fleeting world caused your head to ache.
Finally you joined the tavern of Eternity.
Like an arrow, you sped from the bow
and went straight for the bull's eye of bliss.

This phantom world gave you false signs
But you turned from the illusion
and journeyed to the land of truth.

You are now the Sun -
what need have you for a crown?
You have vanished from this world -
what need have you to tie your robe?

I've heard that you can barely see your soul.
But why look at all? -
yours is now the Soul of Souls!

O heart, what a wonderful bird you are.
Seeking divine heights,
Flapping your wings,
you smashed the pointed spears of your enemy.

Rumi's poems are a wonderful reminder to us of our divine nature. They are a great source of hope and ask us not to fear death, for there is certainly an 'afterlife', and our souls live on.

The experience of an NDE is often an important one, because it reconnects us with our source. People, who go through it, have a message for the entire humanity that we need not fear death, because there is an afterlife, a positive experience that will be awaiting us when we die. This is what is beautifully expressed in the poems of Emily Dickinson & Jalaluddin Rumi.

References:

[1] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Raymond_Moody

[2] http://www.visioninconsciousness.org/New_Age_A24.htm

[3] Chakraborty, Ashit Chandra. *Religious Behaviour & Spiritual Experience*, Advaita Ashrama, 2013

[4] <http://bloggingdickinson.blogspot.in>

[5] <http://sufism.org/sufism>

[6] <http://www.khamush.com/poems.html>