



Svaroopā® Vidya Ashram

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Big Questions #9

What is Death?

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The Self never dies. Indestructible, ever-existent, unchanging, Self-Knowing Beingness-Itself, your own Self does not die when your body dies. When you know who you are, there is nothing to fear. But when you feel, “I am my body,” you live under constant threat. Worse, you believe that death is annihilation. The mystical secret is that death is not the end. It is merely another step in your ongoing process. This is the good news. The bad news is that the process is a long one.

You know that death is not the end if you’ve attended the death of a loved one. They leave. They don’t cease to exist. It’s acknowledged in our words, “the dear departed one,” who “has left us.” They “pass away.” Many yogis have asked me about visitations from departed loved ones. Thus it is clear to the yogi that their loved one still exists, but in a different plane or dimension than most embodied beings can perceive. It is also clear that yoga opens up your ability to perceive at that level. Why?

When you can perceive the subtle levels of reality, whether others can or not, you are able to perceive these levels within yourself. This is how you find your Self, your own indestructible, ever-existent, unchanging, Self-Knowing Beingness. You find and revel in your own eternity. This also makes you better at working with your body and mind as well as handling your life in the world. Win-win.

The sages of India emphasized having a good death. They prescribed certain ways to live in order to have a peaceful passing. I have spent a lot of time meditating in cremation grounds in India. I remember one person’s fire that burned white hot, with very little smoke, the flames leaping into the sky. My friend told me, “That was a good person. Only a good person has a fire like that.”

Along with the sages, the physicists also tell us that whatever is born must die. Whatever is created is eventually destroyed. Only one thing continues without end, the One Reality from which all has come. You are not something that was created. God did not create you but became you and is being you now. Your body was created, even your mind was shaped into form, but your essence is the One Divine Essence. You are “That Which Never Dies.”

Acchedyo 'yam adaahyo 'yam akledyo "'sho.shya eva cha
Nitya.h sarva-gata.h sthaa.nur achalo 'ya.m sanaatana.h
— Bhagavadgita 2.24

The Self cannot be cut, the Self cannot be burned,
The Self cannot be wet, the Self cannot be dried;
The Self is eternal, all-pervading, constant,
Unchanging and primordial.

Your body can be cut or burnt, wet and dried, but your essence is untouched. Perhaps you enjoy when it’s hot out and you’re sweating, or maybe not, but your own Self is unaffected by heat or cold, water or wind. You must take care of your body so it will last and so it doesn’t trouble you too much. This makes you able to focus on what you came here to do. What is that?

The purpose of human life is to know the Self. If your highest purpose was to have lots of children, you would have been born as a rabbit. If you came to be powerful and to travel far and wide, you would have been a virus. If your life was about having great resources, you would have been a forest with uncountable leaves.

If you came here to be popular, you would have been a lake or waterfall. If you wanted to serve others, you would have been the sun. If you came here to pursue your senses, you would have been a hummingbird, who eats half their body weight every day. Every creature has a specialty. What is the specialty of the human being?

Your special ability is to know your own immortal essence. It is not a thought or belief. It is not an idea, hope or prayer. Your own essence is immortal already. The only thing lacking is your

knowing. This knowing is an inner knowing, a knowing beyond words, the only knowing that is worth knowing. It is called “svarootpa vidya,” the knowing (vidya) of your own svarootpa (Self), which is why we are named *Svarootpa*[®] Vidya Ashram.

You’re in the process of Self-discovery, getting to know your own Self. You may have pursued other goals in this lifetime; you certainly did so in prior lifetimes. And if you don’t get enlightened in this lifetime, you can do as many more lifetimes as you would like. In other words, you get more than one chance. Yoga’s teachings on reincarnation are titled, “Doctrine of Transmigration of Souls.” Your soul transmigrates into different bodies through time, as needed. It is part of yoga’s teachings on karma.

Because your soul is eternal, it wants to merge into its source. Like a spark from a bonfire that soars into the air, shining brightly through the dark, then it falls back into the fire again. In this metaphor, the fire is the light of Consciousness. You are the spark shining so brightly, yet being separate from the fire and wanting to become the whole fire again.

Your “sparkness” or sense of individuality is created and sustained by prana, the energy of life itself. Your body is enlivened by prana, which keeps your heart beating and moves your breath. At the end of your body’s ability to support your presence in it, the repetitive rhythms of your pranic flows dissolve and merge back into universal prana. You will merge back in too but only if you are ready. If your sense of self is more limited, you earn a lifetime that expresses that.

You may go to heaven or hell. The Shiva Samhita¹ explains that virtuous actions earn you a place in heaven and vicious actions earn you a place in hell. However, it is not for all eternity. When the pleasures or sufferings that you have earned are complete, you are born into a new body again. Thus you continue the process until you know who you are, so you can merge into your own Source.

One who merges within while remaining alive is called a siddha, a Master of Consciousness. Or you can merge on the way out, the focus of some yogic systems. This means that death is an opportunity! Are you ready? It doesn’t work well to think that you can get ready later, for you don’t know when death will come. Both of my parents outlived their parents by 30 years or more, which means genetics is not a guarantee. Eating healthy and doing yoga certainly helps with your capacities as well as your longevity, but I’ve seen yogis die, both from accidents as well as illnesses. This is one reason that my Guru often told us,

A yogi always remembers his death.

He didn’t say that you should always think of your death, but to remember your death. How do you do this? You can only remember something you have previously experienced. Yes, this is how memory works. You have lived many lives already, which means you died at the end of each one. You are not a new soul. You are an old soul or you wouldn’t be interested in these mystical teachings. You’ve been around before. And here you are again. It means you’ve got another chance to make it.

You could get enlightened this time. It’s like the old TV show, *Mission Impossible*. “Your mission, should you choose to accept it, is to know who you already are.” Then death becomes deathless. In the Mahabharata, the Deathless Boy says, “Death does not exist.”

You are the Self right now, while you are in a body. When you leave your body, you will still be the Self. In the knowing of your own Self, you are free while you are in a body as well as when you are done with it. This is why you were born – so you can be the One who never dies.

THIS IS AN ARTICLE IN A YEAR-LONG SERIES, “BIG QUESTIONS”

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¹ Shiva Samhita 1.24-1.28