

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES

Near Death Experience from Vedantic Perspective

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Abstract:

This paper focuses on the concept of death from the point of view of Advaita Vedanta and modern science. Death is a matter of fear to all as its nature is unknown to all. Different scholars define death from their own perspective and thus death as a natural phenomenon becomes mystery to all. Various philosophers and thinkers found the valid ground of death in the lap of after death explanation. And that point the qualities like virtue and sin get their existence. In other words, it can be stated that the concept of 'karma' gets its existence because of the unchanging natural phenomenon of death. To the ignorant mind death bears a symbol of pessimism, but to the wisest it is a matter of optimism. A better understanding of life is possible if someone concentrates on the concept of death as life comes through death. From the Vedic period to this era of modern science, death as a concept attracts one's attention as it is a subjective phenomenon. The Advaita Vedanta provided a proper answer to this subjective phenomenon but science in this modern era with an objective outlook describes it as an end in itself. But the phenomenon like NDE (Near Death Experience) or OBE (Out of Body Experience) questions the validity of the scientific measurement. Though science has developed with the passage of time, the explanation of that subjective phenomenon is still based on mere induction. In different mythologies different characters wanted to get rid of the grip of death. Satan or Asuras without proper acquaintance of its real nature wanted to establish their supremacy over death but failed. On the other hand, saints or prophets thinking death as a natural phenomenon were able to free themselves from the cycle of life and death. The proper realization of the frailty of the human body can shoe the right path of universal brotherhood. Only death defines human beings as a similar entity, so proper knowledge of that concept with proper realization is needed to create a corruption free universe.

Keywords: *Near Death Experience, Chitta, and Soul*

William Hazlitt says-

No young man ever thinks he shall die. He may believe that others will, or assent to the doctrine that 'all men are mortal' as an abstract proposition, but he is far enough from bringing it home to himself individually. (58-59)

It is very clear from the above mentioned fact that human beings become less conscious about death. In other words, it can be stated that the willing suspension of this consciousness makes people indifferent about death. This indifference towards death can be termed as the indifference towards truth. People like to avoid this phenomenon as they are afraid of this phenomenon or in other words it can be stated in the words of William Hazlitt. William Hazlitt says –

In my youth, I could not behold him, for the crowds of objects and feelings, and Hope stood always between us, saying, 'Never mind that old fellow! (P-60)

In the above mentioned quotation the writer is talking about objective phenomenon and this objective phenomenon is associated with worldly feelings. But it has to be understood that like the worldly objects, these worldly feelings are also very transitory in nature. But when a static or eternal phenomenon approaches, the acceptance of that phenomenon seems to be problematic. The discomfiture regarding death grips one's mind when someone regards death as a material phenomenon. And that material phenomena define death as the cessation of brain functioning and everything is over. And that is what all on a sudden puts human beings in a state of thinking where each and every materialistic hectic schedule seems to be meaningless. Does it mean that death encourages a passive life? The answer is 'no'. 'Death' as a concept can't be materialized so easily. To prove that mysterious phenomenon as a natural one, it is necessary to analyze death from the point of view of spiritualism. Swami Vivekanda in his work *Jnana Yoga* talked about the existence of this universe in the following manner-

There is nothing new: There will be nothing new. The same series of manifestation are presenting themselves alternately like a wheel, coming up and going down. All motion in this universe is in the form of waves , successively rising and falling systems after systems are coming out of fine forms, evolving themselves, and taking grosser forms, again melting down, as it were, and going back to the fine forms.(p-255)

The concept of death exists as a static phenomenon in this universe. And there is nothing new to this scary phenomenon. As Swami Vivekananda says about the cycling system of life in the above mentioned quotation, it is easy to understand that there is nothing can be termed as death. Death seems to be an important part of this cycling system to carry on this old phenomenon of the universe. Swami Vivekananda describes 'self' as the illumination and mind has been depicted as the instrument on its hands. So from the point of view of Swami Vivekananda the external organs receive the impression of a thing and send it to internal organs and then internal organs send it to mind. From mind that impression of the object goes to another region which is called 'chitta' and this is the place where 'will' organized. After that organized will presents itself in front of self of a man from where action gets its motivation. Now the question arises what is death then? The answer of this question can be found in a fine manner in Advaita Vedanta. Swami Vivekananda expressed from the point of view of Advaita Vedanta his view regarding death. According to him, the shape of any object is the result of matter and force and that's why this human body as a combination of matter and force is going to be declined one day in accordance with the law of form. But the self of man is not a compound and that's why it is beyond the grip of the law of cause and effect. And so it is indestructible. The same concept can be analyzed properly from the point of view of the *Near Death Experience*. This phenomenon i.e. near death experience refers to personal experiences in time of death or after being declared clinically dead. The modern improvement in cardiac resuscitation techniques makes it possible to register those experiences as medical science with this improvement gets the ability to bring back some people from their impending death. The foundation of the *International Association for Near-Death Studies (IANDS)* in 1981 showed the importance of this phenomenon. Some important traits of NDE are peace, body separation, entering darkness, seeing the light and for some subjects depressed experience, terrified visions etc. The positive and negative experiences come in front of us. But another thing is that the experience of NDE varies according to Spatio- temporal matrix of a person i.e. the culture of a person does have an influence on one's NDE. But the reason of this NDE can be found in Swami Vivekananda's *Jnana Yoga* which he analyzed from the point of view of Advaita Vedanta. Swami Vivekananda says-

Each work we do, each thought we think, produces an impression, called in Sanskrit Samskara, upon the mind, and the sum total of these impressions becomes the tremendous force which is called "character" . The character of a man is what he has created for himself, it is the result of the mental and physical actions that he has done in his life which gives a man the next direction after death. (P-294)

It is clear from the above mentioned quotation that one person's thinking in one's own cultural context determines one's experience in time of death. Most of the NDE experience talks about the presence of heavenly creature or relatives. The presence of that heavenly creature reflects the image of God or goddess to which one is belonging and this vision of experience can be termed as 'Samskara' which he/she has acquired throughout his/her life. The word "Samskara" talks about good or bad side of it which in turn gives the impression of one's own character. According to Advaita Vedanta after death 'Samskara' doesn't destroy instantly as it moves along with mind. But a time comes when mind also dissolves. The persistency of Samskara depends on the material on which it is based. When the mind dissolves in the long run, the process of dying becomes complete. The NDE shows incomplete process of dying, in other words it can be stated that one's experience of NDE reflects the movement of Samskara along with mind. And that's why people perceive different things, but according to their mode of culture. Pim Van Lommel says *Scientific study of NDE pushes us to the limits of our medical and neurophysiologic ideas about the range of human consciousness and the mind-brain relation. (P-139)*

To prove the above mentioned point of view it is important to judge the validity of this statement through the description of NDE which has been described by a nurse of a coronary care unit in the following manner-

During night shift an ambulance brings in a 44-year-old cyanotic, comatose man into the coronary care unit. He was found in coma about 30 minutes before in a meadow. When we go to incubate the patient, he turns out to have dentures in his mouth. I remove these upper dentures and put them onto the "crash cart." After about an hour and a half the patient has sufficient heart rhythm and blood pressure, but he is still ventilated and incubated, and he is still comatose. He is transferred to the intensive care unit to continue the necessary artificial respiration. Only after more than a week do I meet again with the patient, who is by now back on the cardiac ward. The moment he sees me he says: "O, that nurse knows where my dentures are." I am very surprised. Then he elucidates: "You were there when I was brought into hospital and you took my dentures out of my mouth and put them onto that cart, it had all these bottles on it and there was this sliding drawer underneath, and there you put my teeth." I was especially amazed because I remembered this happening while the man was in deep coma and in the process of CPR. It appeared that the man had seen himself lying in bed, that he had perceived from above how nurses and doctors had been busy with the CPR. He was also able to describe correctly and in detail the small room in which he had been resuscitated as well as the appearance of those present like myself. He is deeply impressed by his experience and says he is no longer afraid of death. (P-139-140)

The above mentioned description of NDE simply proves the theory of Advaita Vedanta which states that consciousness survives even after death. It remains in the form of Samskaras attached to the mind. That person's NDE who was able to see or experience what was happening in the chamber proves that consciousness is the main instrument which works through sense organs. When someone dies his /her sense organs do not work but the operation of his/her consciousness continues and it is clear from the above mentioned NDE experience. In Advaita Vedanta the sense organs have been described as instrument which represents the object outside in the world. But in time of apparent death when a person remains unconscious objectively, actually becomes more conscious when he/she knows the process of their physical function getting rid of objective sense organs. And that is the reason why an NDE occurs. The NDE experiences bring into light the concept of soul as an immortal one. Soul with the impression of

Samskara has been described as *jiva* and it is the *jiva* of that person that experiences all the happenings there in the hospital. Swami Vivekananda talks about the working of soul metaphorically in the following manner-

All this universe was in Brahman, and it was, as it were, projected out of Him, and has been moving on to go back to the source from which it was projected, like the electricity which comes out of the dynamo, completes the circuit, and returns to it. (P-299)

In the above mentioned quotation the cycling journey of soul has been described. The same may be explained from the point of view of science which looks for a definite source. So an object can't be stated that it is devoid of source and if it is so: an abstract entity like soul/consciousness does have its own source. This idea has been expressed in a fine manner in Aurobindo Ghosh's poem *Life and Death*. The cycling system of these two phenomena came in front of everyone in the very first line of Aurobindo Ghosh's poem *Life and Death - Life, death, -death, life :(L-1)*

The above mentioned words represent two different aspects of human life. And these opposite ideas get their meaning because of the presence of each other. From the point of view of structuralism it can be stated that 'death' gets its meaning because of life and if there is no life, 'death' can't be regarded as a word with proper meaning as it loses its features. But Aurobindo Ghosh says-

Life only is, or death is life

Disguised-

Life a short death until by life

We are surprised. (P-10-13)

It is very easy to understand from the above mentioned quotation that there can't be anything called 'death'. According to the poet death is nothing but a short break in the continue journey of life or in other words it can be stated that death is nothing but a reflection of hidden life. Then this paper wants a change in outlook to the concept of 'death'. Bhagavad Gita says-

As are boyhood, youth and decrepitude to an embodied being in this (present) body, similar is the acquisition of another body. This being so, an intelligent person does not get deluded. (P-48)

This paper urges for universal brotherhood as each and every person has been represented with a common entity i.e. soul. To prove the existence of the soul the scientific observation of *NDE* has been represented in this paper. The purpose behind this is that to bring into light the scientific attitude of *Veda* towards death that science is confronting now-a-days in the shape of *NDE*. All this points that have been described from the point of view of *NDE* and *Advaita Vedanta* prove the immortality of the soul.

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