

ON THE WINGS OF DEATH

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BIRTH AND DEATH

Birth and death are the two unavoidable painful events in everyone's life. Though the birth of a child may be rejoiced by the relatives, it is certainly painful to the newly arriving entity. It is clear from the invariable crying of a newly born child. Everyone enters this world with a confirmed irrevocable return ticket to depart from here. It is irrevocable because it cannot be cancelled unlike other confirmed return tickets. Only the solace is that the return date is not disclosed by Parameshvara. Otherwise the person will be jeevanmrita – dead even while living! Such a departure of the individual entity jiva leaving behind the present physical body is called death. At that time the subtle body of the individual accompanied by a few other necessary factors departs and travels to the next body and enters it. Such an entry is the new birth of that jiva. The Brihadaranyakopanishad, Jyotirbrahmana and Saareerakabrahmana (4-3-34 to 4-4-6) describe in detail this transmigration. The Chhandogyopanishad (5-10) also describes it. This is to inculcate vairagya in the mind of a mumukṣu by highlighting the unavoidable pain involved in the birth and death.

WHILE ON THE VERGE OF DEATH

The Upanishad gives the illustration of a jiva (atma endowed with ignorance) returning from the dream state to the waking to describe paralokagamana (transmigration). Like going from dream to the waking, the jiva goes from this body to another loka (field of experience) (Br.U.4-3-34). The jiva leaves behind all that is done and experienced in the dream there itself and enters the waking. Similarly, leaving behind everything done and gained in this world, the jiva goes to another loka. A lesson can be taken from this. People earn puṇya to go to heavenly lokas hereafter, but none earns pāpa (sin) to go to hell. Sinful actions are indulged in to amass quicker gains here in this loka. All such things obtained remain here only, but the papa travels with the jiva to another loka. Therefore a viveki should desist from sinful deeds.

The departure of the jiva from the present embodiment is best illustrated by a heavily loaded cart starting its journey on a village rugged road (Br. U.4-3-35). A cart loaded with many things driven by a sentient entity (such as bull) goes making noises because of heavy weight. Similarly the vijñanamaya jiva (i.e. the entity endowed with the subtle body) abiding in the present physical body inhabited (or illumined) by the self-luminous chaitanya, departs with expiration making sounds of hiccup etc.

People who shift their residence from one place to the other, transport their goods to the new one. In olden days, a cart was the vehicle. At death the subtle body overloaded with the goods of karmaphalas, upasanaphalas and vaasanas is the cart. While waking from the dream, the things of dream are left behind but their impressions (samskaras) are brought in the waking. Similarly while leaving the existing body the home, wealth, properties (which are actually not proper ties for mukukshu) are left behind whereas the load of their vasanas accompanies further.

Vasanas, karmaphalas and upasanaphalas serve as the prompting factor of transmigration. The cart is directed by its cartman to the destination. So also the self-luminous chaitanya (Paramatma) leads the jiva to its next destined body.

Atma is all pervasive. Such an entity cannot have departure or arrival. How can atma leave a body and take to another one? Yes, in reality atma cannot travel. But it appears as though endowed with upādhi after its reflection in it (upādhi). It is similar to the reflection (appearance) of the sun in a vessel etc. filled up with water. Atma has no connection with the upādhi on its own. When a water-vessel moves the movement of reflection in it gives a false appearance as if the sun moves. Similarly when the subtle body separated from the gross one travels, chidābhāsa (reflection of atma- chaitanya) in it moves. This is mistaken as the travel of atma. When the person was alive, the chidābhāsa in his subtle body only used to keep him sentient. At death, the subtle body leaves the gross one. As a result the chidābhāsa in that gross body stops. This is what lay people describe as the atma has left the body. In reality there is no travel or arrival for the ever all pervasive atma.

Here is a piece of information which all are supposed to know and remembering which they should develop vairāgya (dispassion). A great sorrow befalls the person who is on the verge of death when the vital parts of the body are being extracted by the vital air (prāna) in the form of udāna-vāyu. Its function is to eject the subtle body from the gross one. From the groaning etc. of a dying person it is very clear that the process of death is an agonizing state. So is the birth. In between some tinsels of joy accompanied by more sorrows may be available. In this repeated cycle of transmigration, one's sense of commerce has to be used to find out if purchasing of paltry fleeting pleasures at the cost of enormous sorrows is justifiable. It is easy to ape the majority and get drifted along the sense pleasures coveted by the masses. But it needs courage to find out the transient and sorrowful state of samsāra in its right perspective. Only a rare few can do it (Kt.U.2-1-1).

When the body gets emaciated by disease or old age the subtle body is thrown away from all limbs like a fruit such as mango etc. from its stalk. The said śruti (Br. U. 4-3-36) gives the examples of three types of fruits. A mango even if raw can fall when struck by a stick. So also a healthy person can die on account of striking by weapons etc. The second is that of a wild fig (called oudumbara). It falls naturally when ripe since its bond with the stalk gets loosened. Similarly the old age naturally loosens the bond of subtle body with the gross one resulting in death. The fruit of ashvattha (pippala) tree is the third example. Its fruits fall off even by the impact of a strong wind. Likewise a person can die on account of being struck by lightning, earthquake, cycle, tidal waves etc.

The route adopted by the jiva or the subtle body while departing from the gross body after getting separated from the vital parts is described by the śruti as 'pratinyaayam' (through the reverse route of entry). The jiva having emerged from its place in the heart during the sleep gains the waking state through the route of nerves (naadis). But at the time of death, it goes back in the heart in the reverse order through the route of nerves. Unlike such movements earlier to travel from one state of consciousness to one of the other two, the present entry in the heart through the nerves is only to proceed further to the next body after death. The purpose of such final entry of jiva in the heart (the seat of antaḥkarana) is described as 'praanaaya eva' means 'to sustain the vital airs (prana) in the next gross body where it is going to take birth. (Br. U. 4-3-36).

It is well known that the jiva takes the new body for undergoing bhoga (enjoying and suffering) of bhogya (objects of enjoyment or suffering). The jiva on the verge of dying is obviously weak. Such an entity unable to work cannot procure objects of pleasure and suffering for which purpose the new body is being assumed. There is no room for such a doubt. The karmaphalas of the departing jiva acquire the objects of experience beforehand. The śruti (the Veda) gives an illustration of a king. Suppose a king is on his way to visit a particular place in his kingdom. The officers, village-leaders etc. who are hired servants of the king and receive benefits from him, wait for his arrival by keeping food, drinks and accommodation etc. ready. Similarly the parents and the other relatives of the newly arriving child wait with its requirements. It is interesting to note that the śruti refers to the new entity to be born as 'Brahman' only to remind us that the jiva is nothing but Brahman in reality. Only due to ignorance and consequent upādhis Brahman appears as a sansari jiva.

After the death, atma (jiva) travels endowed with the upādhi of prāna. The word prāna literally means vital airs. It is used for indriyas (senses) also because they subsist on prāna. But here the word prāna signifies the entire subtle body. The ignorant person on the verge of death, having got intense weakness in the body becomes unconscious as it were. Then the senses such as eyes etc. reach that entity (i.e. jiva) in hridayam (heart) in the sense buddhi abiding therein. It is well-known that the jiva is atma conditioned by buddhi (vijñānamayah). The eyes etc. indicate all sense organs, organs of actions besides faculties of thinking and knowing. All these along with vital airs during the waking state are stationed in their respective places and are actively engaged in their functions. This is described as if a fishnet is operated to catch the fish. The jiva spreads its net to catch the sense objects and accomplish actions. At the time of death the network is being withdrawn totally in one's buddhi (subtle body) to take with oneself to the next body.

The faculties of perception, action and thinking etc. operating through their corresponding organs and others derive their powers to functions from their presiding deities such as the sun, moon, Indra etc. These deities enable their counterparts in the body to function by lending the required powers to them. This phenomenon is regulated by the prarabdha-karmas of jivas. Once that is over, the body that was useful for bhoga (enjoyment or suffering) is no more so. As a result when this body is on the verge of being dropped, these powers in the organs etc. return and merge in their main deities. The perception, actions and thinking etc. in the dying body stops, though indriyas (senses) etc. are still with the jiva. It is like the electrical gadgets stopping their functions when the power of supply is cut off (Br. U. 4-4-1). For example, the sun the presiding deity of eyes, who used to favour (the eyes) earlier while living for the sake of bhoga abandons them at the time of death. As a result the ocular power aspect belonging to (āḍityāṁsha) abiding in the eyes leaves them and merges in its source of the sun. Then the jiva is unable to see the form. This is true for all functionaries such as sense-organs, organs of action. This is a universally known fact. People say that this dying person does not see, hear etc. At that time all these faculties become one with the subtle body.

ACTUAL TAKE OFF BY THE JIVA

The dying person is not conscious of anything from the external world. Then how can that jiva know about its future body to take off from here and reach the next destination.

According to the laws of Ishvara by prarabdha karma there is a glow of cognition at the tip of specific nerve which gives it a clue about the future body and loka by the projection of vasanas. This phenomenon is called 'pradyota' (light). It is like the dreamer seeing the dream world though totally unaware of one's waking. Guided by such direction the jiva having identified with the future body takes off from the present one. The gate of exit from this body is determined by the lokas to be reached. Higher lokas are reached through the brahma-randhra (aperture in the head), eyes, ears etc. as the case may be. As for other lokas, the other parts in body are used as a way of exit. It is determined by one's karmaphalas. Thus the jiva gets pradyota just before departing and departs along with the main pranas and the senses. It becomes savijnana immediately after the departure. Pradyota (the knowledge of the next body) was given to tell from which particular nerve to depart. Immediately after the departure, once again the necessary knowledge (called vijnana) is imparted to reach the destined loka. (Br. U. 4-4-2).

The śruti does not give all these details for people to chalk out their travel plan by choosing the desired body and the loka. The entity on the verge of death is almost unconscious. There is no free will at that time. These both types of knowledge are programmed by the results of individual's karmas and upasanas in accordance with the laws of Ishvara. The śruti cautions all to be careful and selective now itself as directed by the scriptures while deciding what to do and think repeatedly (i.e. upasanas). The present karmas etc. determine your future. Either get the direct self-knowledge for ever, never to return or at least pray to Ishvara sincerely to give you jnana and vairagya. The Kenopanishad warns everyone: If you directly know atma during this sojourn on earth, it is well done. If not, great calamity (of transmigration) awaits you (Ke. U. 2-5). Therefore do not be complacent with little smoothly running life. The mother śruti warns because these topics are beyond the purview of human intellect on their own(i.e. apourusheya).

THE ENTITIES THAT ACCOMPANY JIVA

The śruti further adds that the result of vidya (upasana) and karma besides the impressions (samskaras) in the antaḥkarana in the form of vasanas called purvaprajnaa accompany the jiva travelling to the next loka (Br. U. 4-4-2). These three serve as the cause of the future birth and bhogya (objects of enjoyment and suffering) etc. available therein. Vidya (upasana) and karma include both enjoined (vihita) and forbidden (nishiddha). Seeing a nude woman, thinking of it and indulging in pornography is an example of prohibited upasana. Vidya decides the specific types (species) of the next body. Then karma serves as the cause of proficient or deficient features of that body. But purvaprajna ((vasana) manages (carries out) the two (vidya and karma). Purvaprajnaa is prominent among them because that alone is capable of carrying out the other two. Therefore, importance should be given to develop good vasanas (samskaras). Five gross elements that go into the constitution of the future body also accompany.

THE MODE HOW JIVA REACHES THE NEXT BODY

A leech having reached the tip of a straw takes the support of the next straw and then only withdraws its remaining part from the previous one. So does the jiva, The śruti says very clearly that like a leech, atma (jiva) leaves the earlier body only after fixing the next one accurately. It remembers the next body in the sense it knows clearly it as depicted by the vasanas that reveal the next body.

THE MATERIAL CAUSE OF THE FUTURE BODY

The Śruti describes the material cause of the future body with an illustration of a goldsmith (Br. U. 4-4-4). The goldsmith makes new ornaments by melting the earlier one. The basis material gold is the same for both the earlier and the present ornament though their forms are different. As for the new body of the jiva the gross (panchikrita) five elements used for the earlier body alone serve as the seed though it has further growth by other conducive factors. The travelling subtle body is covered by the portions of grossified five elements from the earlier body. They are minute because of being very little in measure and so are not visible. The new body created by those five elements is further nourished by the sperm (virya) of the father, the ovum (shonita) of the mother besides all nourishing factors such as food, drink etc. The travelling subtle body of the jiva coupled with vidya (upasana), karma and purvaprajna (vasanas) covered by the constituent gross five elements is like the seed whereas the sperm etc. are necessary supplementary factors for it to grow. It is like a seed growing into a big tree. The soil, manure, water, the sunlight etc. are necessary. But the seed is the original locus. The reason why the Śruti gives the illustration of a goldsmith is because he uses the same gold that constituted the old ornament to make the new one. Here also a portion of the gross five elements of previous body go into the constitution of new one. When the earlier ornament is melted, its shape gets destroyed. Then a new shape is given. In the case of jiva, the old shape is left behind as a corpse. The sperm and ovum of parents cast the shape of new body. The portion of five gross elements (bhutamsha) of earlier body represent the gold. The actual body is in the place of ornament. Thus the subtle body covered by bhutamsha travels to take the next body. The transmigration is not only revealed by the Śruti, but also discussed and established accordingly in the Brahmasutras, 'Tadantarapratipatti (3-1-1 to 7)' adhikarana. One thing is certain that the topic of transmigration is objectively non-verifiable by the common masses (except in the case of some prodigies though found rarely). One has to depend on the Veda which is the highest means of knowledge (pramana) in the case of apourusheya (beyond the purview of human intellect) things. There is no room here for free thinking or fallacious arguments. Any number of decrees passed to abolish the phenomenon of transmigration are ridiculous, absurd and display the petty mind of those who indulge in such things for their selfish ends. It cannot alter the truth.

...to be continued