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Do We Wake Up After We Die?

ATTENTION has been focused recently on the question of whether, according to the Theosophical tradition, we are conscious in the after-death state. Adam Warcup and E. Lester Smith, for example, have addressed several aspects of the subject in the journal of the English Section. If the question is reduced to its most basic form, there are two extreme views on it.

One view is that when we die we enter a state of unconsciousness that endures through the kāmaloka (or astral plane) portion of the post-mortem experience and ends only when we enter the state of devachan, in which we create a private, dreamlike world of consolation. In this view, which is based chiefly on a reading of *The Mahatma Letters*, there is no full consciousness at any time after death and no interaction with other beings. The only exceptions are abnormal and largely undesirable ones.

The other view is that dying is changing the focus of our consciousness and that the post-mortem state is simply a continuation of living consciousness, although the post-mortem environment is governed by different natural laws from those of the physical world. This view is associated particularly with the investigations of clairvoyants like C.W. Leadbeater. According to it, although periods of unconsciousness may intervene, the post-mortem state is just as conscious as the living state, and on the other side of death the norm is a continued interaction with other beings.

These two views of the post-mortem state differ in many ways, not least in the style of their descriptions. The descriptive style and the projected details of post-mortem existence are not of central concern, however. In fact, the thanatography (to coin a term for the experiences we undergo in the post-mortem state) of one individual must be just as different from that of another as their biographies are varied. The key difference between the two views is the question of consciousness: After we die and before we reincarnate is there any period of time when we are volitionally conscious of other beings in that world or this, so that we can interact with them? The first view says no, the second yes. Because there is disagreement within the theosophical tradition on this fairly basic point, it is worth looking at the two opinions and the grounds for holding either.

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The first view is based on a close reading of *The Mahatma Letters*, perhaps the most fundamental of all theosophical teaching texts, and therefore it merits careful attention. According to it, at death we lapse into a state of unconsciousness, during which the distinctively human element in us (manas) is sorted out in the kind of tug of war between the desire element (kāma) gravitating toward the attachments of the past life and the intuitional element (buddhi) pulling toward the enduringly impersonal in us. After this period of 'gestation' has separated the transitory from the enduring in our personalities, we enter a dream state of perfect happiness, in which we are consoled for the personal injustices of the past life. The whole post-mortem state is a kind of sleep after the waking time of life; during part of it we slumber unconsciously, and during part we dream pleasant dreams. The state of the living is a world of causation; the state of the dead is a world of effects in which no new causes are generated. There are other details, but that is an outline of the first view.

With this view there are several problems. One is that it rests upon simplistic dichotomies: life and death, consciousness and unconsciousness, waking and sleeping. Although such dichotomies are useful for some purposes, they can be misleading.

The dividing line between life and death, for example, is not a sharp one. In the normal course of existence, the consciousness begins to withdraw from life long before the body ceases to function. Individuals vary greatly in this regard, but it is not unusal to find a person of advanced years whose individual consciousness (the self that wills and creates the personality) has largely withdrawn, leaving behind the physical elemental to function through the body. Such an individual is connnected to the body by only the thinnest of threads; the life that still functions is the collective consciousness of the elemental life of the form, coloured by the personality that earlier used that body as its vehicle.

Even the point at which the physical body can be said to have died is a matter of dispute. Is it when breathing stops, or the heart ceases beating, or brain waves end? Medical persons are not agreed about what constitutes 'death'. Similarly, consciousness is a complex thing—of many kinds and levels. We are not just conscious or unconscious; we are conscious or unconscious in various ways to various degrees. And sleep research in recent years has shown that there are a variety of states of sleep through which we pass cyclically during the night. To talk merely about waking and sleeping is inadequate to the complexity of the facts.

The comparison of life and death to waking and sleeping is a metaphor that, like all metaphors, is useful though incomplete. Part of its usefulness relates it to the question of cause and effect. The state of life is envisioned in *The Mahatma Letters* as a world in which we generate causes, and the post-mortem state as one in which we experience the effects those causes have generated:

> Like a rosary composed of white and black beads alternating with each other, so that concatenation of worlds is made up of worlds of CAUSES and worlds of EFFECTS, the latter—the direct result produced by the former. (*ML* 9, p. 47)

But cause and effect is another

dichotomy that simplifies reality since every effect is in reality the matrix for new causes. It is only the Buddhas—those who have awakened from the great sleep of illusion—who generate no new causes in any world. In the world of causes, we obviously experience effects; karma operates here as well as after death. So in the world of effects we must expect to generate causes by the way we respond to the effects. During ordinary sleep we handle problems, discover solutions to puzzles, and adjust to the experiences of the waking day; those sleep-time responses affect us during the following waking day. So also during the sleep of death we must generate causes that affect our next lifetime. To talk of life and death as occurring respectively in worlds of causes and effects is just as much a metaphor as talking of them as waking and sleeping. Metaphors taken literally are mental traps.

Another problem with the view that the post-mortem state is an unconscious one is, ironically, the very thing that demands we take it seriously. It is derived from the descriptions of after-death conditions in *The Mahatma Letters*. Those letters contain basic theosophical teachings, but they are neither complete nor authoritative in the sense that they can be cited as scripture to prove a point. The letters in that volume were never intended for publication; they were private instructions given to a particular person. The letters are not a comprehensive, balanced exposition of the Wisdom Tradition; they are fragmentary remarks on particular questions and issues that arose during the course of a personal correspondence. To interpret *The Mahatma Letters* as a public document setting forth the essentials of the Wisdom Tradition is to misread the book.

When we read *The Mahatma Letters* we must keep in mind that we are eavesdropping on part of a private exchange. We seem to have only part of the correspondence of one side and practically none of the other. Furthermore we are reading what was intended for a particular reader, not for us. That is an important point. Truth and Reality do not exist in the abstract in the relative world in which we live. They exist only in relation to someone who perceives them. Consequently all truths have to be explained in terms appropriate to the person addressed.

A parable of the Buddha explains the need to accommodate what we say to our audience and the conditions under which we speak. A little boy is trapped on the upper floor of a burning building. His father urges the lad to jump from the window into his waiting arms. But the boy is afraid to jump and does not understand the danger of the fire. So the father calls to his son, 'You have wanted a pony to ride. I have here a wonderful white pony—jump into my arms and you shall have it.' The little child, impelled by his longing for the pony, jumps and thus saves himself from burning. There was no white pony, so did the father lie? Or did he merely speak to the boy in language that the boy could understand about what was good for him? The white pony was not a lie, but a metaphor.

The teaching about the after-life given to Sinnett was given in a context of rampant spiritualism. Bell-ringing, table-tipping, floating ectoplasm, spirit guides, messages from loved ones on the other side, news of events in the spirit world

—such as spirit marriages—fascinated Westerners, including A.P. Sinnett, in the late nineteenth century. The rage for spiritualism then was much like the vogue for channelling today. The messages received then, like those today, were mostly vacuous and often silly. Much of the phenomena was fraud. Some of it, said H.P. Blavatsky, was genuine, though not due to the causes supposed by the spiritualists.

The teachings given to Sinnett were clearly intended to counteract spiritualist explanations of seance phenomena. It is not surprising that they should de-emphasize information about the conscious survival and functioning of beings after death, concerning which a great many foolish ideas were current. The fact that the letters from the Mahatmas stress unconsciousness and dream states after death in opposition to consciously functioning discarnate beings may be a consequence of the time at which they were written and the inclinations of the addressee. Sinnett himself recognized the incomplete nature of the teaching he had been given. In the introduction to the American edition of *Esoteric Buddhism*, prepared the year after the original publication of the book, he wrote:

> It must be remembered that my statements concerning the phenomena of *Kāma loca*,—the astral world, from which most of the phenomena of spiritualism emanate,—have been the fruit of my own questions and inquiries rather than a portion of a carefully adjusted series of lessons in occult science, dictated by professors applying themselves to the art of teaching. That, indeed, has been the way in which the whole body of exposition which this book contains has been worked out, and it naturally follows that some parts of it are less complete than others, and that none can be much better than general outlines.

In view of such a warning, we should not base an interpretation of anything on the fact that information is lacking in *The Mahatma Letters*. It is possible that the view of the post-mortem state in the letters may be an accidental consequence of the fact that those letters were intended for A.P. Sinnett, who relished phenomenal displays and came out of a society enamoured with spiritualism and its conversations with the departed. The writers of the letters may have been considering what their correspondent needed to hear and what he did not. They may have been adapting what they wrote to those needs and so have offered their correspondent the appropriate white pony.

The second view of the post-mortem state—that the 'soul' or surviving entity is conscious during part of the time after death—is usually associated with such second-generation Theosophists as C.W. Leadbeater, but in fact in its essential points it existed already in the first generation. It holds that post-mortem existence is normally a mixture of unconsciousness and consciousness of various kinds in various proportions. It holds that the dead are at times aware of others and respond to them.

Blavatsky herself seems to have held the second view. She discusses the subject in a long passage originally written in Russian and translated as part of *From the Caves and Jungles of Hindostan* (pp. 557-70), later adapted in the journal *Lucifer* and incorporated from there into *The Key to Theosophy* (pp. 164-65).

Originally the discussion was put into the mouth of a character who is a wise and holy teacher. The teacher is responding to an interlocutor who does not believe that anyone can be unconscious between lives:

> The whole gist of your question is to learn whether complete loss of self-consciousness and self-perception after death is possible, even in the case of a deep-rooted materialist? Is that so? (p. 559)

The teacher goes on to assure his questioner that it is possible because the after-life is moulded by the expectations we hold during life. So if we are convinced there is no consciousness apart from the body, when the body dies we will be unconscious; but if we expect to be conscious, we will be:

> *In order to live a conscious life in the world to come, one has to believe first of all in that life during terrestrial existence.* ... Following the dissolution of the body, there commences for it a period of fully awakened consciousness, a state of chaotic dreams, or an utterly dreamless sleep. ... It is evident, of course, that belief or unbelief in the fact of conscious immortality is unable to influence the unconditioned reality of the fact itself, once it is recognized; but the belief or unbelief in it on the part of each separate personality cannot fail to give colour to that fact in its application to each of them in particular. (p. 564)

In this passage we are told that one of the possibilities after death is a period of 'fully awakened consciousness' and that 'conscious immortality [that is, survival]' is a reality without conditions.

In the same passage the after-death state is compared to sleep, in a well-known analogy, but with a difference. The teacher maintains that the sleep of death is more real than the waking life:

> Therefore, we call the life beyond the grave a *reality*, and the terrestrial life, including the terrestrial personality, an *illusion*. (p. 567)

He assures his questioner, who is still bothered by the notion that death is sleep-like, that by 'sleep' he means something other than we might suppose:

> Do you find fault with the simile between sleep and death? Just recall that three kinds of sleep are known even to man: the deep and dreamless sleep; the chaotic sleep, with confused dreams; and finally, the sleep where dreams are so real and lucid that they become, for the time, completely real to the dreamer. Why, then, can you not admit that the same takes place also with the soul when freed of the body? Upon separation from the body, there begins for the soul, depending on its merits and mainly *its faith*, a life either completely conscious or semi-conscious, or it falls into that deep, dreamless sleep which is without awareness and is comparable to the state of *non-existence*. (p. 568)

The kind of post-mortem state that involves complete consciousness is likened to lucid dreaming. The latter is a phenomenon studied increasingly in recent years; in such dreams, dreamers are aware that they are dreaming and can deliberately control the course of the dream. In lucid dreams we are conscious within the dream state, and, H.P.B. says, in one after-death state we are also 'completely conscious'.

Blavatsky's view is echoed by William Quan Judge, her representative in America and her choice, along with Annie Besant, to head the Esoteric Sec-

tion after her death. He considered the questions 'Are the majority of people, those who are neither very wicked nor very spiritual, conscious in Kāma-Loka that they are dead; and are they able to see the Kāmic sights with which it is said to be filled?' He answered those questions as follows:

> Precisely as physicians know that every human body has its own physical idiosyncrasies, which are well known in their effects upon and relations with medicine, so in the state after death the idiosyncrasy of the person has an effect upon the state there. There is no positive or definite rule which applies invariably to every being after death. Consequently there are many different kinds of states in 'Kāma-Loka'. Some people are aware that they left the earth, others are unaware of it; some are able to see those they have left behind, others not; and certainly everybody in Kāma-Loka is able to see all that pertains to the particular division of that state in which he may be at the time. (*Echoes*, 2:317)

This view of Blavatsky's and Judge's was adopted by second-generation writers and became the dominant theosophical teaching on the subject. C.W. Leadbeater, whose hallmark was a vivid and detailed description of his subjects—which indeed is largely responsible for his popularity as a writer—presented such an intimate and homely picture of life in the after world (for example in *The Inner Life* 2: 3-20) that it is hard not to think of it as white-ponyish. Nevertheless, if we brush aside Leadbeater's Victorian style, with its circumstantial details and sentimentality, the substance of what he says is compatible with the view of Blavatsky and Judge.

In addition to the opinions of theosophical writers from Blavatsky on, it is a universal tradition of religions that the human being remains conscious in the post-mortem state and interacts with others. The Christian-Islamic tradition of heaven and hell is meaningless unless the surviving souls are aware of their rewards and punishments. The Catholic tradition of purgatory similarly assumes that it is possible to change one's state in the afterlife, and that requires volitional consciousness. The Eastern traditions of *svarga* and *avitchi*, like Western heaven and hell, assume conscious experience after death. In one form of Buddhism, reincarnation in some state—an intermediate world, if not this physical one—is assumed immediately after death; consciousness never ceases. Even in the Tibetan tradition, which in some respects is closest to that of *The Mahatma Letters*, the soul in the *bardo* state is given a choice just before rebirth of accepting the Light and thereby escaping further physical incarnations. That is, volitional awareness is assumed. Indeed, the belief in an unconscious afterlife which has been found in *The Mahatma Letters* seems to be very rare, and is perhaps unique, in the religious traditions of the world.

Moreover, generations of human beings have believed they were in contact with those who had recently died. It is an extremely common experience for a relative or close companion of one newly dead to sense the presence of the other after death. The survivor may see or hear or merely 'sense' the presence of the dead person. The perception almost invariably brings with it a strong sense of comfort—a certain knowledge that the dead person is happy and well.

Modern psychologists may explain such impressions as a form of grief therapy—a trick we play upon ourselves as comfort for our anguish, guilt, or fear. The effect of such impressions is indeed almost always one of comfort, but the psychological explanation is a bit of scientific reductionism for which there is no more evidence than there is for the contrary explanation of the experience as an actual contact with the dead. It is only the assumption that contact with the dead is not possible that drives the dogmatic materialist to look for alternative explanations. A universal human experience is best taken at face value and accepted as being what it appears to be, unless we have stronger reasons than prejudice to hunt for another explanation of it.

The kind of science and religion that H.P. Blavatsky battled against aspired to simple, clear answers for all questions—answers in accord with their respective, albeit conflicting, prejudices about the way the world is. Today such simplistic aspiration is still apparent in the mystically veneered skepticism of pop scientists like Carl Sagan and in the fanaticism of religious fundamentalists of many faiths. However, Theosophists must resist the temptation to succumb to that aspiration. There are fundamentals of Theosophy, but there can be no theosophical fundamentalism. Theosophists canonize no books and no saints. They value the universal traditions and experiences of humanity. They have a decent respect for the opinions of others. They weigh everything in the scales of their own intellect and intuition.

Many questions, especially those about the ultimates of life and death, are not susceptible of simple, clear answers. For life and death are complex matters. Language seems to allow two kinds of statements. One is a hypothesis that should be iudged quantitatively and objectively. The other is a metaphor that can be judged only qualitatively and subjectively. Out of hypotheses we construct logical arguments. Out of metaphors we make poems. All of our talk about the afterlife, like all of the really important things in life, including much that masquerades as science, is really poetry.

All descriptions of the post-mortem state in theosophical literature and elsewhere are a species of poetry. They are accounts that humanity tells itself to explain the universe. One of the great virtues of the theosophical account is that it hangs together. It is consistent. A view of the post-mortem experience as a generally conscious one has been the dominant theosophical view since the days of H.P. Blavatsky. It is consistent with the rest of theosophical teaching, with the traditions of humanity, and with the common experience of human beings all over the world. To the extent that it is inconsistent with the teaching of *The Mahatma Letters,* we should suspect that the letters were written with a special purpose, or that we have misread them.

The question of consciousness after death is not, however, of ultimate importance. All the greatest teachers have advised us to be less concerned with the workings of the flow of nature, with the fluctuations of life and death, than with how we can get in touch with the reality behind that flow. The important question is not whether we wake up after we die, but how awake we are while alive. □