

CHAPTER 7

Life After Life

Life after death ...

Many of you may find it strange to even begin a discussion on such a topic. It is not very often that we think about death. For many of us, it is much more natural just to live, without considering what will occur in that last moment. Or, maybe, we are sure that life is only that which is taking place in the here and now, and that death means the end of our existence.

Of course, today it would be rather strange to believe in the next world in the same way people did several millennia or centuries ago. For example, the picture of hell, where poor sinners were thought to roast in eternal flames, or the vision of paradise, where righteous people expected to spend their time enjoying heavenly music surrounded by beautiful angels in snow-white garments, hardly seems realistic to anyone today. However, that does not mean that the very idea of a person's life continuing after the death of his physical body is absurd.

In any case, from time immemorial, the representatives of quite different religious and philosophical trends have believed in the immortality of the human spirit. We are mistaken if we think that such a belief is outdated. Now more than ever, new scientific data can help us see in a new light and better understand the questions that humanity has asked for many centuries, such as the question of death and immortality. What is man? Life? Love? Death? Each of us has his own answer to these questions, even without meditating on them consciously.

Let us consider one of them. What is death? From the point of view of a doctor or a biologist, death is the stopping of the organism's vital activities, the cessation of the heart and brain functions. One moment, a person is alive — with all his complicated inner life, his feelings and recollections — and suddenly, due to the failure of his body, he has ceased to exist in this world. Does this really mean that everything composing our life, everything determining our personality, depends only on the functioning of our heart and brain? In other words, does the "self" simply disappear when our heart stops beating? Or does something remain; something which religious people call the soul?

What determines the inner self?

Your personality is determined not by the color of your eyes, your height, or your facial features, but by your ideas, your internal world, the world of spiritual "substance." All of us belong not only to the visible, but also to the invisible world. It is not necessary to be a religious person in order to become confident of this statement. For instance, what are you thinking about now, while reading these lines? What are you feeling? If you are interested in this discussion, your thoughts are probably



concentrated on this text. But maybe you are sitting at home, having settled yourself cozily on a sofa, with the textbook and a cup of tea. Despite your best intentions to prepare well for the next lesson, it suddenly becomes very difficult for you to concentrate on the text you are trying to read. Your thoughts are taking you away, through the events of your last holidays or back to your classmate's birthday party which you attended last Sunday.

Your body has remained in the same position, on the sofa, and any detached on-looker would say that you are studiously preparing for your lesson. But your thoughts and feelings at this moment are very far from your body. Unlike your body — limited by time and space — your thoughts dwell in a dimension not subject to these limitations. And it is undeniable that invisible, immaterial things are the very essence of our human nature. Not only thoughts and feelings, but also the effort to understand the surrounding world; the capacity for unselfish, self-sacrificing love; the determination to understand oneself, to find one's place in the world, the constant search, the dissatisfaction with oneself — all of these make us human and different from animals.

Where did we acquire these capabilities? Where does the soul come from? What is its relationship with the body? Can brain cells generate the human soul, in the same way that the liver produces bile? There is a very significant difference here. The liver is just one of the human body's organs, whose purpose is to produce substances necessary for the organism's vital activities. But the feeling of love toward one's family, the ability to think logically, and the other elements of personality are not substances; we can't see them, even if we carefully observe all the processes occurring within the brain cells. How can neurons produce something immaterial? We have no evidence that such things happen.

To say that the body is dead and hence the soul does not exist anymore is like saying that radio waves do not exist because your radio no longer works. At the moment of death the connection between soul and body is cut, but how can you prove that the soul itself ceases to exist?

Is it possible to look beyond the boundary of death?

Of course, it is also difficult to imagine strictly scientific proofs of the opposite assertion that a human personality goes on living after the body's death. Yet, although it seems quite fantastic, there are data suggesting that death is only the passage from one life to another life. You may have heard about the books by an American medical doctor, Raymond Moody. His book *Life After Life* reports of people who have lived through a clinical death (that is, those who have stepped over the border between life and death, and then were brought back to life).

His writings seem to have "opened the gate" to numerous investigations by other scientists dealing with the same phenomena. Having questioned many people who had undergone a clinical death, Dr. Moody concluded that today we cannot disavow people's stories of returning from "the other side." Thanks to the efforts of these

researchers, we have records of the experiences of people who have “died.” This evidence can help us understand death in quite a new way and to reconsider whether there is nothing beyond this boundary. Another scientist, Dr. Elizabeth Fiore, writes about this subject in her book *The Unquiet Dead*:

Have you ever chanced to think about what will happen to you after death? My studies in the hospital allow me to assume that life goes on after biological death. Recollections, thoughts, feelings, perception do not disrupt. ...

This material is based on talks with hundreds of people who have undergone death and then have been brought back to life. After the publishing in 1975 of Dr. Moody’s book *Life After Life*, this scientific field began to develop rapidly, and the results of different scientists’ work surprisingly correspond to each other. ...

The evidence of people who have undergone a clinical death are amazingly alike, up to separate details. ...

Death appears to be a smooth, natural passing to the spiritual reality, and is not accompanied by the loss of consciousness. My patients spoke about the immediate feeling of liberation from pain and all kinds of fears which they had experienced a minute before abandoning their bodies. They felt as if they were rising high and soaring, observing at the same time everything that was occurring with their prostrate bodies below. Often they tried at that time to convince their relatives that nothing terrible was happening to them, that they were alive. With a surprising feeling of freedom they went on rising, rising to the source of a bright, white light. The moment of joining that light brought a feeling of infinite love, peace of mind and harmony. ...

Those who “died” noticed that they possessed a perfect body, devoid of any of the infirmities they had when alive. For example, if death had been caused by a car accident in which the physical body was disfigured, the new spiritual body would be undamaged and intact. If people had been blind, after their death they could see perfectly. In such cases, after being revived, they surprised their families and doctors by quite detailed descriptions of what had been happening to them and around them while they were supposedly “dead.”

One case described by Dr. Moody is especially surprising in this respect. A blind man had undergone clinical death. When revived, he still could not see. But to the surprise of his family and doctors, he managed to give a precise account of everything that had happened while the doctors tried to revive him. Furthermore, he even described the surgery in detail, the color of the walls, the curtains on the windows, the appearances of the doctors operating on him — and all this while his body lay prostrate with no signs of life.

One can find many such examples in the books by Drs. Moody, Fiore, Kubler-Ross and other scientists. In his book *The Mystery of Life and Death*, Russian priest Alexander Men also spoke about this:

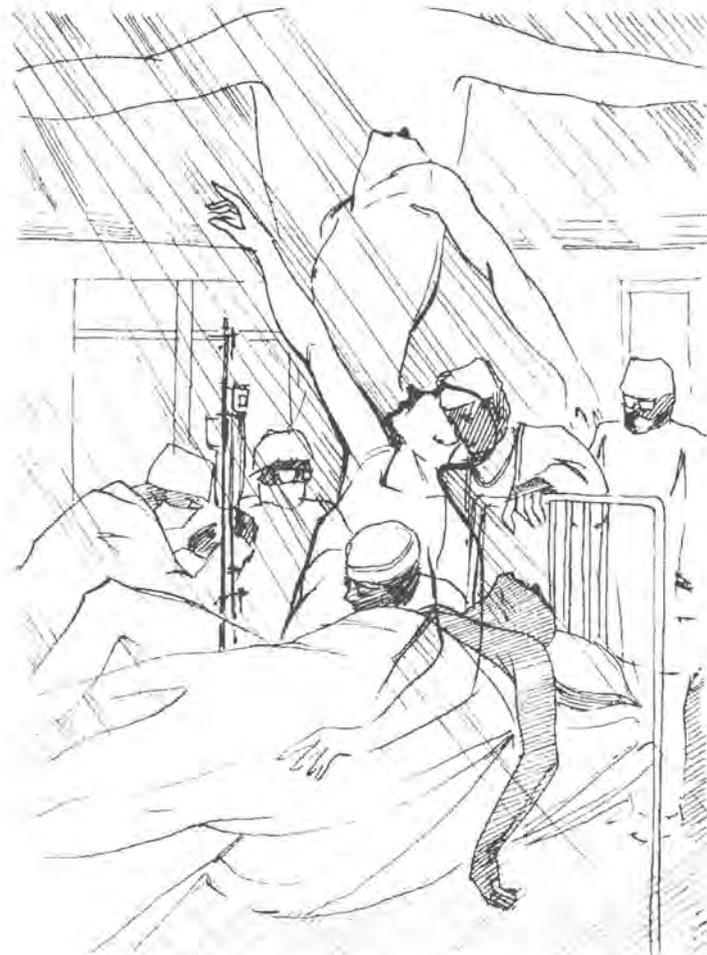
Many years ago, before the book *Life After Life* was published, I had come across such phenomena. I wrote down the accounts of people who had died on the operating table but then returned to life, thanks to the doctor’s efforts. ... I must say that these accounts were similar to each

other, and when Raymond Moody's book appeared, I was not surprised at all, because everything proved to be rather familiar to me. And on the whole, there was nothing unexpected about it for Christians, because we had always professed this creed.

All of these anecdotal investigations cannot be considered scientific proofs of life after death, but they testify to the fact that there are phenomena that require a new explanation. This is the proper scientific approach — not trying to adjust new facts to already existing theories, but, on the contrary, putting forward and then testing new hypotheses that could explain such seemingly fantastic phenomena. Who knows — perhaps we are standing on the threshold of a discovery that will change significantly our ideas about human beings. Perhaps soon the issues discussed in the present chapter will become not a question of belief but a subject of scientific inquiry.

Opening the curtain to the unknown

It is not mere chance that at present, in various books and in the mass media, so much attention is being paid to issues that puzzle modern science. Many prefer to either ignore or to dismiss these ideas and experiences as quackery. We have heard about parapsychology, biological fields, spiritual healers, and extra-sensory perception. No doubt there may be charlatans involved in these areas who take advantage of such general interest. But it is unreasonable, because of this alone, to completely dismiss any phenomena that are not within the limits of classical scientific theories. The controversy itself shows that we are witnessing a new science being born, one that will discover new laws for us — the laws of spiritual reality. That is why it is important to separate fact from fiction, not to ignore or try to discount these unusual phenomena, but to seek to explain them.



Knowledge of these “non-material” experiences may affirm the notion that man is not only a material being but has a spiritual dimension as well. Perhaps besides a physical body endowed with instinct and five senses (touch, smell, vision, hearing and taste), man also possesses a spiritual body with five spiritual senses that correspond to the senses of the physical body. Perhaps also, man's soul and all that is considered as “self” or personality exists after the death of the physical body. This spiritual dimension may indeed correspond to a spiritual world, with which we will become acquainted once we cross the threshold of death. It may be that this spiritual world is no less real, multicolored, and multifaceted than the one in which we are living now.

Given such a hypothesis, the explanation of all the phenomena mentioned above is quite logical. For instance, from this point of view, extrasensory and extraordinary abilities would be nothing but a manifestation of spiritual capacities that are dormant in most people. Certainly the testimony of those who have undergone clinical death points to the existence of a spiritual world that awaits all of us in the future.

Why should we consider the afterlife?

A question may be stirring in many of you: Why should we discuss life after death at all? One thing is obvious to each of us: Sooner or later we all will die, and then we will know for certain whether there is something beyond this physical existence. But, you may be thinking, what's the use of trying to understand this something *now*? What does it have to do with our present life here on earth? There is another question closely connected with the previous one. If it is true that our life on earth is only a short moment in comparison with eternity in a spiritual world, then what is the meaning of this earthly life?

Belief in the immortality of the human soul can support our search for life's deeper meaning, although this is not to say that meaning in life can be found only under this belief. It would be wrong to assert that people who do not believe in the soul's immortality are less developed or less moral. But, for a man of weak moral will and principles, the conviction that there is no judgment or life after death provides

another reason to justify an egotistical lifestyle. If life is only 70 to 80 years of existence after which there is nothing, we may come to feel that "all is permitted," and that the main aim of life should be the search for pleasure and the satisfaction of our desires by any means. In the words of Ivan Karamazov, "There is no virtue if there is no immortality." Why should one strive for anything if at the end all of one's efforts will be crowned by the same experience that everyone else has — death?



Of course, this is a complicated problem, and it would be wrong to assert that those who do not believe in the soul's immortality are hopeless ego-centrists. But for a person not possessing a strong will and moral principles, such a notion contains tremendous danger, because it gives a logically-grounded possibility of justifying any kind of action. It is not by chance that one of Russia's greatest writers, Dostoyevsky, paid so much attention to this issue.

In contrast, when a person understands that his existence does not end with the death of his body, he comes to take an entirely different view of his earthly life. The fear of death disappears. He begins to realize that his life is unique, that it is given to him only once, and that his fate in the next world depends on how he lives his life in this world. Understanding this, such a person is much more likely to use his life to develop his capacity for sacrificial, active, unselfish love; a love not only for friends and relatives, but for everyone.

Let us turn to the words of Alexander Men once more:

It is the very Eternity that enriches the life on this side of the borderline. Because then we are not allowed to say that death's abyss will swallow everything. ... For us, it is sufficient to know this kernel of practical truth: What is sown in this life will grow into Eternity, have an echo in Eternity. And it is so clear, so logical. ...

Those people who were brought back to life after they had experienced the state of clinical death gained the same kind of understanding. Here is an excerpt from the book *Life After Life*, beginning with one survivor's testimony:

Since then, it has been on my mind constantly what I have done with my life, and what I will do with my life. My past life — I'm satisfied with it. ... I really did everything I wanted ... and I'm still alive and I can do some more. But since I died, all of a sudden, right after my experience, I started wondering whether I had been doing the things I had done because they were good, or because they were good for me. Before, I just reacted off the impulse, and now I run things through my mind first, nice and slow. Everything seems to have to go through my mind and be digested, first.

I try to do things that have more meaning, and that makes my mind and soul feel better. And I try not to be biased, and not to judge people. I want to do things because they are good, not because they are good to me. And it seems that the understanding I have of things now is so much better. I feel like this is because of what happened to me, because of the places I went and the things I saw in this experience.

There is a remarkable agreement in the "lessons," as it were, which have been brought back from these close encounters with death. Almost everyone stresses the importance of trying to cultivate love for others in this life, a love of a unique and profound kind. One man who met a being of light felt totally loved and accepted, even while his whole life was displayed in a panorama for the being to see. He felt that the "question" the being was asking him was whether he was able to love others in the same way he was being loved. He now feels that it is his commission while on earth to learn how to do so.

Perhaps an understanding of the infinite scope of our lives can lead us to an understanding of more profound moral principles and to the existence of a spiritual force that is always available to us.

Stages of human life

Let us now discuss one final issue related to this topic. Consider the real possibility that our earthly life is a time of preparation for our life after death. It means that our spiritual development transcends the boundary of death.

Think about how your existence began. First, you spent the first nine months of your existence in your mother's womb. During this time, all your organs were formed, even though most of them were quite useless during this stage of life. Why should you have, for instance, lungs or eyes? You were surrounded by liquid and darkness. The purpose of your development during those nine months was simply to prepare you for the next stage of your life.

At last, the moment of your birth arrived. If you had been conscious, isn't it possible that you would have perceived your birth as death? A baby must experience something close to agony as it is separated from its mother and enters the outside world.

At that point the second stage of your life began. You were now in quite a new environment with new laws and new priorities. Your physical abilities developed rapidly. At the same time your spiritual side, your ability to love, began to grow. Just as the development of your physical organs seemed unnecessary during your life in the womb, you may think that your spiritual growth is unimportant for your physical life. After all, it often seems that a complete egocentric is able to live quite a happy life.

What we have sown
in this life will grow
into Eternity.

But what if your years on earth are actually preparation for another stage of your life? What if things that seem unnecessary here suddenly become indispensable there? Aren't these questions worth thinking about?

Perhaps now it is not the most important thing to imagine the nature of our life beyond death. For now, it is much more important to remember the meaning of our life here on earth with all of its infinite possibilities.

Rose of Jericho

by Ivan Bunin

As a sign of the faith in eternal life, in resurrection from the dead, in the ancient East they put a rose of Jericho in coffins and graves.

It is strange to call a rose, moreover, a rose of Jericho, this tangle of dry prickly stalks looking like our tumbleweed, this hard grass of desert which can be found only in the stony sands near the Dead Sea, at the lifeless edge of the Sinai Mountains. But, according to the legend, it was called so by Holy Savva who chose to dwell in the terrible Fire valley, a bare and dead hollow in the Judean desert. He decorated the symbol of resurrection given to him as a wild prickle with the most beautiful earthly simile he knew.

For this prickle is indeed miraculous. Picked and carried away by a wanderer, it can lie dry, gray and dead for years. But if put into water, it begins to give small leaves and rosy flowers. And the poor human heart rejoices: There is no death in the world, no end to the past! No partings and losses, until my soul, my love, my memory is alive!

I comfort myself like this, too, and resurrect in myself those bright ancient countries where I also walked some time, those blessed days when the sun of my life showed midday, when, in the prime of my force and hopes, together with her, who, by God's will, has become my life-long companion, I was making my first long journey, my marriage trip which was at the same time a pilgrimage to the Holy land of our Lord, Jesus Christ. In the great silence and forgetfulness it lay before us — the valleys of Galilee, the hills of Judea. ... It was spring, and the same anemones and poppies were blooming before us as in the time of Rachel, the same lilies were flowering and the same birds singing as in the Gospel parable. ...

A rose of Jericho. In the living water of my heart, in the clear liquid of love, sadness and tenderness, I immerse the roots and stalks of my past — and my magic plant is alive again. Move away, my inevitable hour when this liquid runs short, when my heart becomes scarce and dry, and the dust of forgetfulness covers my rose of Jericho forever.

