



THE CONCEPT OF DEATH IN ADVAITA PHILOSOPHY

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ABSTRACT

In this society, as there are various rituals to welcome the birth of a new one, similarly there are various rituals to show our respect, love and sorrow towards one's death. Even there has been an inherited concept about the fact that one's life beyond death depends on his day to day's karma¹.

KEYWORDS: Ātman, Brahman, Brahmasūtra, Brhadāranyakopaniṣad, Death, Upaniṣads, karmas, Kaṭhōpaniṣad, Rgveda, Soul, Śrīmadbhagavadgītā, Vedānta.

AUXILIARY NURSE-MIDWIVES

Some follows this concept some does not. According to this statement, one who follows the path of truth, for him, death has been a mysterious subject which has given rise to different questions as-

- What happens to the Soul after death?
- Whether the Soul does exist after death or not?
- Whether the Soul takes the shape of a new body as per theory of rebirth? etc.

All this questions always makes us inquisitive about the subject.

The ultimate subject of spiritual world is known to be this mysterious word *aham* or I . Even in the oldest treatise (*Śāstragrantha*) the Vedas, the mystery behind the word *aham* has been the subject of debate. The word *veda* is originated from the root of *vid*, which mean 'to know'; to know one self, and the world around. The *Veda* is the holy book through which our ancient *Rṣis* has tried to discover and find out the mystery of knowing one self and the world around. The Vedas are divided mainly into two parts: the *karmakāṇḍa* (work portion) and the *jñānakāṇḍa* (knowledge portion). The famous hymns and the rituals of the *Brāhmaṇas* belong to the *karmakāṇḍa*. Those books which deal with spiritual matters apart from ceremonials are called *jñānakāṇḍa* or the *Upaniṣads*. It is not that all the *Upaniṣads* were composed as a separate portion of the *Vedas*. Some are interspersed among the rituals, and at least one is in the *Samhitā*, or hymn portion. As a rule the term *Upaniṣads* is also applied to the philosophical treatises which are scattered in the *Vedas*. These treatises are collectively called the *Vedānta*. Sometimes the term *Upaniṣads* is also applied to the books which are not included in the *Vedas*, e.g. the *Śrīmadbhagavatgītā*.

From the *Upaniṣadsic* period till now, it is seen boundless eagerness to find the mystery behind birth and death in this world. According to *Cārvāka* , Soul does not exist apart from the body- *bhasmībhūtasya dehasya punarāgamaṇam kutaḥ?*²On the contrary *Vedānta* say, the Soul is immortal. Human Soul never leaves this mortal world until and unless one realizes his own eternal Self to extreme satisfactory level or *ātmatatva*.

*Jātasya hi dhruvormṛtyuḥ dhruvaṃ janma mṛtayasya ca*³ according to this statement, if not today but with a hundred years span one has to face death-if it's true then why should one be scared of death or cry because of the same? According to *Ādhyātma-Śāstra* Soul is perpetual and immortal. But when we become judgmental about death, a natural question arises about the importance of the human body and its existence as per their previous deed.

The body which is moving, speaking, seeing is impermanent. Still for the well being of the Soul whatever one has to do in this world is to be done through the body itself. The mortal body is the basic unit to create an individual in this world, still some *Mahātma's* sacrifice their own lives for great intension which they consider more valuable than their lives. Such instances are given below:

In *Raghuvamśa*, we have been seen to protect *Muni Vaśiṣṭha's* cow from lion, king *Dilīpa* has tried to sacrificed his life ; In *Kathāsarit -sāgara* and *Nāgānanda*, we have been to save a snake, *Jimūtavāhana* tried to sacrifice his life to *Garuḍa*. Even in *Mahābhārata's Vanaparva* and *Śāntiparva*, to protect *Ṛṣis* from the hand of devil *Br̥trāsura*, *Dadhīci*, tried to sacrifice his life. It has thus been seen that great soul never hesitates to sacrifice their life for well being of others.

The Concept of Death from The Vedic Era to The Epic Period:

During Pre-Vedic age, human's instinctive inclination was towards self –protection from natural calamities, wild animals, diseases, etc. During this time the motto of life was centralized to their own physical body and its protection from the outer world. They used to think that there lies and invisible powers inside their body that makes their body workable and when it perishes the body become inactive which they called 'death'. They were mostly in search of power which rules their body instead of life beyond death or mystery behind death. In the Vedic age where people has been seen in search of actual reason of death in different ways, when question related to life beyond death, has also been seen to arise among the *Ṛṣis*. During this age, *Yama*, the son of *Vivasvān*, was regarded and worshiped as the God of death, but 'Yama' as described in *Purāṇika* age is not similar to *Yama* of *R̥gveda*⁴. In the *Purāṇas*, we come to know that *jīva*, the Soul of the deceased, is painfully torn from his body by the *Yamadūtas*. These *Yamadūtas* are not particular being at all, such as human beings, animals or Gods. In reality, they are the same *Pisācas* who hang around new corpses, attempting to eat the *piṇḍa* offered to the deceased by the living relatives during *śrāddha-karma*. This situation is symbolic of a journey of these tormented Soul. On the contrary in the *R̥gveda* 'Yama' has been described as a disposer of awards according to ones *karma*. He is the pioneer who depicts the way one should follow according his own *karmas*⁵. Not only this, Soul never dies and comes back even after mortal death of human body is clearly noticed in *Ṛṣis'* thought, as stated below:

*yatre yamaṃ vaivasvatam mano jagāma durakam /
tatta āvartayamasiha kṣayaya jivase //*⁶

In the above *mantras* it is states that one's consciousness (*mana*) has been invited to this mortal world where the body is and reside here again. Thus it clearly shows the concept of rebirth and finally, Death is not the ultimate end.

The Concept of Death in Upaniṣadic Era :

What is death? What are the consequences? These questions have not been elaborated in Vedic *Samhitā*. But in *Upaniṣads* we have come across philosophical gist of death. The *Upaniṣads* has thrown light upon the philosophical thoughts of death.

In *Kathopanishad*, *Naciketā*, son of *Vājaśravā*, has also questioned *Yama* whether Soul exist after death or not? In respect to this question, even in *Yama's* statement not only *Naciketa* even *devatas'* are also confused about the mystery of death, as stated in *Kathopanishad*:

*devairatrāpi bicikīṣitaṃ purā
na hi suvijñeyamaṇuṣeṣa dharmah /
anyaṃ varaṃ naciketo br̥ṇiṣva
mā moparotsīrati mā srjainam //*⁷

Thus the mystery of death is very difficult to explain. In the *Upaniṣad*, death has been defined as Souls infringements from its body and return to the world to fulfill his complete desire. Though human beings are bounded by the cycle of life-death but this Soul remains free. Soul is not bounded to any cycle i.e. it is neither born nor dead, as stated in *Kaṭhaponiṣad*:

*na jāyate mryate vā bipāścinnāyaṃ
kutaścinna babhūba kaścit /
ajo nityaḥ śāśvato'yaṃ purāṇo
na hanyate hanyamāne śarīre //*⁸

According to *Br̥hadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, *Ātman* or Soul is eternal. *Ātman* is the universal essence same as Brahman. It is undying, fearless, undecaying as *Brahman*. On the contrary, human beings are looked upon as the synthesis of the organ of speech, mind, *prāṇa* (cosmic energy) and the turn cosmic desires of differentiation and unison. All these are the basic nature of the body, not of the Soul. Thud a human body has death but its Soul remains immortal.

So, from the above discussion it is states that the human body is perishable where as its Soul is not. Gradually as the body grows, it takes new shape, giving death to its old image, just as a seed transforms gradually to a large tree. Anything which is born is sure to has death and then reborn to pass through the same cycle again and again. If death leads to rebirth thus we can say there is nothing to fear about death as it's an opportunity to welcome a new born to the materialistic world.

The Concept of Death in Post-Upaniṣadic Era (*Nyāya Prasthāna*):

The *Brahmasūtra* of Vādarāyaṇa is known as *Vedāntasūtra*. It is also known as *Nyāya-Prasthāna* of *Vedānta* Philosophy. All the commentaries and sub-commentaries on *Brahmasūtra* are also parts of *Nyāya-Prasthāna*.

While going through all the *Sūtras*, commentaries, sub-commentaries, we come across few explanations regarding death. According to *Vedānta* Philosophy, Soul has its individual existence separately from the body. On the contrary, *Cārvāka*, says that no Soul is apart from the body. To support their opinion they gave often examples saying, I am stout or I am fair there by indicating that the Soul and the body are not separate. According to them consciousness or Soul, is a byproduct of matter. When Soul is a quality of the living body, it becomes extinct with the death or the organic body. Moreover, after the death of a person we do not perceive any process which may generate another life for his rebirth. So, to the *Cārvākas* the term immortality, previous life, rebirth, law of *karma* etc. are all meaningless. But all these statements, advocated by *Cārvākas*, has been dispelled in the commentary of Śāṅkarācārya on *Brahmasūtra*,- *vyāṭirekastadbhavabhavitvānna tūpalabdhiva*⁹. Śāṅkarācārya has given us a very subtle and convincing piece to reasoning his famous *Adhyāśabhāṣya* on this *Sūtra*. He has stated that, if by reasoning the faculties of the Soul are the resultant of physical causes, then the same body should remain even after death, according to the theory of cause and effect. Then there arises a question, why we do not feel the presence of a Soul in the dead body? Thus we must say that Soul is not the physical resultant but only temporary accompanying or concomitants of the body.

Here question may arise, thus the Soul exist while body ceases to exist? *Śruti* answers this question positively by explaining that when a body perishes, its Soul leaves the body and attaches itself to another body. As it is stated in *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*,-just as a leech supported on a straw goes to the end of it, takes hold of another support and contracts itself, so does the Self throw the present body aside, make it senseless, take hold of another support, and contract itself-
*yathā tṛṇajalāyukā tṛṇasyāntaṃ gatvā anyam ākramam ākramya ātmānam upasaṃharati evameva ayamātmēdam śarīraṃ nihatya avidyāṃ gamayitvā anyamākramam ākramya ātmānamupasaṃharat*¹⁰. Hence there is no justification for claiming the opposite hypothesis (the separateness of body and Soul) against this proven truth about Soul's immortality.

According to *Vedānta* philosophy immortal Soul is an opposition to the mortal body. The difference between the two entities is similar to the difference between light and darkness- *tamaḥ prakāśavat viruddhasvabhābayoḥ*¹¹. From the descriptions of those two entities in the famous *Adhyāsabhāṣya* of Śaṅkarācārya on *Brahmasūtra*, we realize that our self is the consciousness. Hence, it must be separate from the body. It is permanent because its character and content are same and uniform. But due to our illusion of knowledge, we cannot accept the separateness of Soul from the body. Sometimes our body or the mind remains in a state of sub-consciousness. As for example, in a state of dream (*svapnavasthā*), we have manifoldness of perception without the co-operation of the body. Therefore the Soul is not a resultant of physical causes. It has a different existence apart from the body. The Soul exists constantly.

The Concept of Death in *Smṛtiprasthāna* of *Vedānta* Philosophy (*Śrīmadbhagavadgītā*):

Śrīmadbhagavadgītā is a part of *Mahābhārata's Bhīṣmaparva* (25th -42th chapter). As in Sanskrit literature, *Mahābhārata* has gained the name of *Smṛtisāstra*, similarly the *Śrīmadbhagavadgītā* in *Vedānta* Philosophy has gained the name of *Smṛtiprasthāna*. Though the *Gītā* an integral part of *Mahābhārata* still it has been identified individually as a separate book of values where *Yogin Śrī Kṛṣṇa* (the representator of Supreme Soul) is the director and the third *Pāṇḍava* Arjuna by Śrī Kṛṣṇa was based on the application of mortal human rights. Lord Kṛṣṇa has given the mortal truth of separateness of the Soul from the body and of the certainty of the Soul which does not die with the body.

Death is a natural inevitable. There is no doubt about it. Common man fears death though it is destined to come when it will come. The wise and valiant do not fear about the same. According to the *Śrīmadbhagavadgītā*, the body of a child, his body as a youth, and his body as an old man, appears utterly separate and diverse. Yet the man feels he is the same from inside and can never be convinced he is different in spite of what his images, or photographs or portraits may show or what his friends and observers may say. The three states (*avasthātraya*) of childhood, youth and old age are contrary to one another (*parasparavirudha*), but the feeling is same.

It is stated in the *Śrīmadbhagavadgītā*:
*dehino'smin yathā dehe kaumāraṃ yauvanaṃ jarā /
 tathā dehāntaraprāptirdhīrastatra na muhyati //*¹²

So, it is true that a man is not what he is in his body, but the Soul which is immortal.

In the *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi*, a *Prakaraṇa* text, written by Śaṅkarācārya, it is said that *mokṣa* is not the death of body- *dehasya mokṣo no mokṣo*¹³. According to Śaṅkarācārya, *moha* is the *mahāmṛtyuḥ*¹⁴ to the human being.

CONCLUSION:

In conclusion from the above discussion it is said that the riddle of Death is yet trying to depict a satisfactory defenation. The *Upaniṣads* again and again face this question. The whole of

Kāthopaniṣad is concerned with this question in the *Chāndogyopaniṣad* and *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* Death is discussed elaborately. The *Bhagavadgītā* is taught to man with the main objective of resolving this riddle. Most of Philosophical doctrines have tried to give a satisfactory explanation of this postmortem phenomenon but *Vedānta* philosophy confronted this question and tried to found a satisfactory answer to it.

We came to know from the previous discussion that there are different accounts of death and rebirth in Indian philosophy. *Advaita Vedāntists* gives us a very detailed description about an existence of *jīvātmans* after departing the physical body. They also explain the experiences in various worlds after death and finally what births *jīvātmans* will have to take returning to this world through *karma*. All these details of experiences and solution are only in the dualistic perception. If we take them to be real, all the rituals prescribed from birth to death are indispensable. The body will fall but the Soul will not. One lives the body and brings his journey to whatever world he is destined, determined by his deeds, to go. And before he takes another body all the rituals prescribe for him, will have to be performed by their relatives. The result of that performance will reach the departed Soul. All these become inevitable according dualistic perception. However, if we can perceive from the non-dualistic position, all these that have been said are ceases to be real. We realize all these are unreal, because in the non-dualistic perception everything is but the Self-*Ātman*'. During our illusion of knowledge, the world appears to us as the separate existing being. Basically there is no world that is non-self. It is said in the *Upaniṣads- sarvaṃ khalvidaṃ brahma*.

However, death and birth are the states of the mortal body but not the essence of the Self. State will pass, but the Self does not undergo any changes. *Jivā's* essence is consciousness. The essence does not come and go. Our body moves, our sense moves, thought come and disappear in our mind. All these movements are ever being watched constantly by the I or Consciousness. But it does not come and pass like the changes it is watching. So, death and birth belong to the body, and not to the Consciousness. Death should thus be seen as the death the body, and not of the Consciousness¹⁵.

END NOTES:

1. *Ṛg.Veda* - 10.14.2.
2. *Cārvāka Darśana of Sarvadarśana Saṃgraha*- 5.
3. *Śrīmadbhagavadgītā*- 2.27.
4. *Ṛg.Veda* - 10.14.1.
5. *Ṛg.Veda* - 10.14.2.
6. *Ṛg.Veda* - 10.59.1.
7. *Kāthopaniṣad*-1.1.21.
8. *Kāthopaniṣad* -1.2.18.
9. *Brahmasūtra* - 3.3.54.
10. *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*-4.4.3.
11. *Śāṅkarabhāṣya* on *Brahmasūtra* -1.1.
12. *Śrīmadbhagavadgītā* -2.13.
13. *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi*-558.
14. *moha eva mahāmṛtyurmumuṣorbāpurādiṣu* - *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi* -85.
15. *na haṇyate haṇyamāne śarīre* - *Śrīmadbhagavadgītā* -2.20.

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