

Committee V
East-West Perspectives on Science
and Spirit: Time and Consciousness

DRAFT--5/15/91
For Conference Distribution Only



F-8



TIME AND AWARENESS OF DEATH

by

Priscilla Murray
School of Education
Dalhousie University
Dalhousie, Halifax, CANADA

The Eighteenth International Conference on the Unity of the Sciences
Seoul, Korea August 23-26, 1991

©1991, International Conference on the Unity of the Sciences

CS Mur
Com 5

East-West Perspectives on Science and Spirit: Time and Consciousness

ICUS XVIII

Time and Awareness of Death

Priscilla Murray
Dalhousie University

Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada

The inevitability of death

There is a story told in the Buddhist tradition of a woman whose son had died. Anguished, she went from house to house seeking medicine for her child. Many laughed at her for looking for a cure for the dead. But at last someone suggested that if she went to see the Buddha he might be able to help her.

When the Buddha heard her plea he told her to bring him some grains of mustard seed from the house of a family in which no one had died. She knocked at many doors in her search but she found no family which had not known death. She began to understand that death could not be avoided; by her son, by herself or by any of these others. She realized that death is common to all--that it is an inevitable feature of the human condition, the end of every life. And then, she returned to the Buddha and asked to learn his teaching.¹ Her grief was undiminished but now her question had changed. Knowing that the life of every being would end, she wished to discover the meaning of life.

And from Mesopotamia in the third millennium B.C.E. the epic of Gilgamesh tells of the king, Gilgamesh, who, forgetful of death, was fearless in battle. Yet when his companion and friend, Enkidu died in sickness, Gilgamesh despaired and set out to cross the waters of death. When asked why he had come on such a difficult and terrifying journey, Gilgamesh replied:

of Muri

For Enkidu; I loved him dearly. ... The common lot of man has taken him. ... I thought my friend would come back because of my weeping. Since he went, my life is nothing; that is why I have travelled here in search of Utnapishtim my father; for men say he has entered the assembly of the gods, and has found everlasting life. I have a desire to question him concerning the living and the dead. (Sandars, p.98)

Now, as then, an awareness of the inevitability of death and of the transience of life may result in a need to find an answer to the question about the purpose of life. After recognizing the universality of death an individual may begin to search for an understanding of the significance of life and, in this attempt, may become more fully alive.

The suggestion that having a constant awareness of death, a *momento mori*, is a useful spiritual practice is common to many traditions. This practice is not a morbid one which is meant to foster fear and melancholy, but one which may sharpen an awareness of the presence of life. The monks who greet each other saying, "Brother, remember death" in so doing, paradoxically, remind one another of the wonder and the mystery of life. A realization that we ourselves, and those who are important in our lives, will die is a realization that the time of life in a particular body is limited. This brings with it questions about what will happen during life, at the end of life and after life and about the value and the meaning of individual time and life.

Yet although we are surrounded by the evidence of the death of all plant, animal and human life, it is difficult to remember that we too shall die. In the ordinary course of events within a year about one hundred million human beings will die, some of them old, some young. In spite of this we act as though we will live forever, because our death is an incomprehensible event for us. It is an event which has no after. The death of any one--myself, one whom I love, or some one other--marks the end of time for that one in many ways.

Death as the end of time for an individual life

Death is most obviously, and by legal definition, the end of the physical body with the accompanying biological and chemical processes. When there is an irreversible cessation of the functions of the brain, which can be medically determined, a clinical death has taken place. This is followed very soon by a biological death with an increasingly evident metabolic activity degradation. By natural processes the chemical components of a body without life disintegrate. The constituent parts are still there, but they no longer form a distinct body or hold a life. After death, the body gradually becomes a part of inorganic material, the dust of the earth.

Death also marks the end of the individual psychic life. The production of thought and feeling, perception, the awareness of sensation, and the realization of pleasures and pains associated with the physical body are no longer possible after death. The mental and affective functions, which can bring reflection and which can actively participate in relationships end at death. These functions may cease before a clinical death, and in these cases we speak more precisely about the continuation of a life which had been human.

While we are alive, each of us participates in a complex network of social relationships and has important emotional, intellectual and physical connections with other people. Death cuts these interpersonal ties irrevocably. The death of anyone is a significant event within the community, in relation to the larger social group as well as at the more intimate level of family and close associates. A community is changed by the death of any one of its members and it must somehow accommodate that change. One who dies will be missed in different ways by all those who had been related to him or to her, because they remember, or they had made plans, or they had had hopes and fears in relation to this person; because they had lived in relation to this person. With this death, the world is no longer the same. And although it is true the world we live in is constantly changing, no other event has such finality or holds such mystery

for us, no other event forces us to realize so clearly the fact of the passage of time.

Being human we can realize that we will die. Knowing this we wonder what we can know about the time after death or what this life, which ends in death, is for. There have been many responses throughout history from different cultural traditions, which reveal a great deal about the societies in which they have developed. At the same time societal understandings of death have a large effect on the life of every individual in the community. The meanings, beliefs and practices which surround death play an important role in human life. Individually and collectively, different understandings produce different worlds. Each person's unique response to the thought of death or to the fact of death indicates much about his or her particular fears, attachments and aspirations and these, in turn, will influence the behavior and attitudes of the individual.

Aware of death, what do we seek to discover?

The moment of death, which is the end of the time for my individual life, like the moment of birth, which marks the beginning of my life as this person, is just as incomprehensible to me as the moment of the ending or of the origin of the universe. The questions 'What am I after I am dead?' or 'What was I before I was born?' seem even more immediate and more urgent than similar questions about the larger universe. And they are of more practical interest. What shall we do faced with what is both certain and impossible to understand?

We might respond, as Epicurus did, and claim that death need not concern us:

So death, the most terrifying of ills, is nothing to us, since so long as we exist, death is not with us; but when death comes, then we do not exist. It does not concern either the living or the dead, since for the former it is not, and the latter are no more.

Epicurus, Letter to Menoeceus²

Yet there are occasions in every person's life when the fact of death, their own or that of another, must be faced and then

this logic is utterly worthless. An awareness of death, as imminent or inevitable, raises two distinct kinds of questions. One kind of question results from an egocentric or worldly concern for the individual and wonders: 'What does death and what-is-beyond-death mean for me and for others?' These are questions about what will happen in the course of time. On the other hand, a spiritual or eternal concern is reflected in questions about the meaning of an individual life or of the life of humanity in relation to a larger perspective and asks: 'In the face of death and in relation to what-is-beyond-death what is the significance of human life or of this life? Who am I? These questions about meaning are not questions about what will happen.'³

Many questions arise from the secular concern about what will happen at the time of death and afterwards to the one who dies or to the survivors. Some of these can be answered by means of a scientific or an empirical inquiry. Family, financial and burial arrangements can all be made in the light of information gained this way. But these investigations are all from this time and from the perspective of this life. Questions which concern the situation of the individual after death, after life and outside of the experience of personal lived time cannot be answered by the present scientific technology, although they are also questions about what will happen--about events which will take place in the dimension of historical time. We might imagine that science might one day discover a way of answering these questions, so although the answers which have been given are not scientific, it can be argued that the questions are scientific questions. Every religious tradition speaks of events which will take place after death and assumes a causal relationship with the activities of the individual during life. For example, Christian descriptions of heaven and hell and the Hindu understanding of reincarnation as a continuation of the law of karma beyond the boundaries of the birth or death of a particular embodiment, point to the rewards or punishments which are the consequences of life lived in certain ways. These kinds

of responses have often been ridiculed as superstitious and irrational by those who regard the empirical and analytic approach of modern science as the only way to arrive at meaningful and reasonable answers.

Yet, even if the answers given to these kinds of questions are not scientific, they are not therefore meaningless. Such answers and the way they are understood reveal an individual's or a society's hopes and fears about the future and how it will be affected by the present, and they provide a way of answering questions about how we should live.

On the other hand, questions about the value and the purpose of life are not scientific questions. They are not questions which can be answered by empirical or analytic methods, and they are not questions about what will happen. In response to a question about the meaning of life some deny that there is any meaning at all, others believe that since we could never know what significance our life might have we should not be concerned with this question, and still others contend that a search for what the meaning of life might be and how it could be fulfilled is the most important activity a person could be involved in.

The meaning of life in the face of death

A nihilistic response to the spiritual question about the significance of human life will have implications for the kinds of behaviors which will be regarded as worthwhile. The narcissist attitude reflected in the motto "Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die" reflects the assumption that there is no other context or perspective which is larger, deeper or more inclusive than our own. Such a view, in the end, becomes cynical.

Life's but a walking shadow; a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more: it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.

(Macbeth, Act V, Sc.v)

This is not a scientific response to questions about the

meaning of human life, although there have been some who have claimed that science can only support such a claim. Freud, for example, insisted that the only healthy psychological attitude towards death which could be justified scientifically was to accept it as an extinction of the person because he maintained, that there could be no truth other than scientific truth. He did not believe that questions about time after death and about the significance of life from another perspective were reasonable questions. This claim that scientific methods are the only way to discover truth, which is made by many within the positivist tradition, is itself a non-empirical hypothesis, but it is one which has many practical consequences. It constitutes a particular response to the spiritual question about death which limits the possibility of meaning in life. Other scientists--Newton, Faraday and Einstein are examples--have undertaken their scientific work to uncover the workings of an ordered universe and have understood their own significance in the light of their contribution to an understanding of the natural laws which govern events. So although the kind of position which Freud argued for constitutes a particular response to questions of meaning, it is not a scientific response nor is it necessarily a reasonable response for scientists to have.

The medical response to death

Whether or not we explicitly deny or affirm the need to seek a way to understand the meaning of life, we are faced with the requirement to know something about the facts of death. These days, in the search for knowledge about any phenomenon, we seek answers from science. The science most closely associated with death is medicine. Doctors and medical researchers are the ones called upon to determine when and why death has occurred. They are interested in and professionally charged with discovering ways to prevent or to cure disease and injury which causes illness and death and in finding ways to delay death.

In order to save their patients' lives doctors often use extreme measures, searching for the treatment which will outwit

25 March

death. Advanced technologies, surgery and a variety of drugs may delay death, sometimes at great human cost, even though death will still end each life. Paradoxically, in spite of medicine's occupation with death, doctors often seem to be uninterested in dying patients. The depersonalization of medicine has increased with the advance of medical technology. Dying patients have often found the medical profession's almost exclusive interest in effecting cures as efficiently as possible to result in impersonal and lonely experiences of helpless dependency in institutional settings, which does not sufficiently take into account the value of a certain quality of human life. Although the hope for the continuation of life and of a return to health should be encouraged in every case, the suggestion that such measures will 'work', may prevent the patient and the family from facing the fact of the inevitability of death for each person, from preparing themselves for the possibility of imminent death and from participating consciously in the dying. When death comes in spite of massive efforts to prevent it, it may seem to be a failure of and a fault of medical science.⁴

The work of Elisabeth Kubler-Ross on death and dying has helped to change some of the prevailing attitudes. Working with many terminally ill patients, she has examined and outlined the stages which individuals generally go through in coming to accept the fact of their approaching death. In emphasizing the importance of dealing with the patient, rather than only with an illness, she has shown how the quality of life of dying patients may be improved in many ways. She has found that these patients and their families often need support in facing the fact of the inevitability of death and in preparing for the possibility of imminent death. In coming to terms with death they frequently find a new understanding of themselves, their relationships and their lives, which they can demonstrate in helping to make decisions about their own treatment and in their choices about what they wish to or need to accomplish and how to live. Kubler-Ross has pointed out that for these patients, as well as for many of those who are intimately related to them, the

awareness of death may provide a context for growth and for a new understanding of the meaning and value of life. The development, which she has called "the final stage of growth", both results in and is a result of a changed consciousness--a new way of seeing the world and of relating to it. The human concern brought to the situation of dying effects a changed understanding of the meaning of life and brings with it the possibility of realizing that meaning. Such a change is a transformation of consciousness, which is not brought about by a scientific discovery, but by a discovery of meaning.

The work of Kubler-Ross and others has led to the establishment of many hospices and palliative care units which attempt to meet the needs of dying patients. As well, more and more patients are now choosing to die at home, participating consciously in the final act of a human life, surrounded by friends and family. This decision often requires the support of the medical profession and there is a gradual change in the way dying patients are treated.⁵ The medical, psychological and pastoral investigations about death which have resulted in this change of attitude have been instrumental in improving the quality of life of dying patients. At the same time the lives of those who have been involved with these individuals have often been profoundly affected. An understanding of the importance of relationships, a change in the order of priorities, a recognition of the fact of the suffering of others and the common experience of death mark the change of consciousness which is often the result of an awareness of death, one's own or that of others. The questions about what happens after death or about the significance of life remain unanswered by science because these questions are not the same as empirical queries. Yet they are answered, not once and for all, but again and again, for they are answered in their answering and not in the answers. More and more they engage those who are concerned professionally with questions of dying, often those who are in the medical or the scientific professions.

Near-death experiences as transformative

With the growing interest in patients who are dying there has been an increasing fascination with the phenomena which are known as near-death experiences. Physicians and others have been struck by the similarities in the reports of some individuals who have been considered dead, yet who have been brought back to life. Kubler-Ross, Kenneth Ring, Raymond Moody and others have made studies of the characteristic stages of near-death experiences. The core experience reported frequently includes feelings of peace, sensations of a separation from the body, of passing through a dark tunnel and of entering into light, and an awareness of a presence which sometimes is said to be a relative of the dying person and sometimes is described as a being of light. The feelings most often associated with these experiences are of joy, warmth and tranquillity.

These studies of the personal reports of individuals' near-death experiences do not provide a scientific proof of life after death, for these people have not died. Scientific statements and theories are based on what we see and what we know from this time and from this place. They do not and cannot speak of what is outside of our time, although the fact that they cannot do so does not prove that there is nothing. The authors of these investigations are often the first to admit this, although the titles of some of the books on the subject, such as, Life at Death or Life after Life are misleading in this respect.

There is a popular misconception which claims that this research shows that everyone, no matter how they have lived, continues to live on blissfully and delightfully after death. This conclusion may allay a fear of death and support an egotistic self-interest, but the point of death, that is, the significance of death, as the end of the time or of the life in a particular body, is thereby missed. If an awareness of death will make no difference to the understanding of how life might be lived, or if it raises no question about what the purpose of this life might be, then although the death of an individual may cause real anguish, grief, and unhappiness for those who are associated

with the one who dies, it will not produce a change in consciousness.

Many of those who have had a near-death experience have reported a lasting decrease of fear of their own death. The typical near-death survivor afterwards experiences a heightened sense of appreciation for life, a change of priorities, a renewed sense of purpose and a greater acceptance of and compassion for others. So for those who have experienced this other form of consciousness there is often a change in the way their lives are lived which results from it. It is an interesting fact that although near-death experiences often change the lives of those who have undergone them, yet very rarely do they affect the lives of those who only hear of near-death experiences, whether they know a great deal about them or not. Such experiences must affect the individuals involved very deeply and may reveal to them the fact that there are aspects of reality and features of experiences other than those which are readily accessible to our ordinary awareness or to scientific investigation. Experiences which change the level of consciousness, of perception and of understanding and which cannot be effective unless they are experienced, are transformative.

Drug induced experiences have sometimes been reported to have caused like changes in attitude--perhaps because of the similarity of the accompanying revelation of the possibility of another kind of perception or understanding. When such an awareness is produced by a drug experience in an unprepared individual, it is generally more superficial and less permanent, as if it is an experience closer to one which has been only heard about rather than one which has been experienced by that person.

Transformation of consciousness on a spiritual path--dying before death

An individual who is aware of or who has heard of and is interested in more subtle levels of reality, or who wishes to become more sensitive in perception and feeling and clearer in thought or who is engaged by questions of meaning and value may

CF M...
12

seek a spiritual path. In every tradition, it is understood that following a discipline is one way that a human being may become more aware of and related to other aspects of reality, both within the self and in the world, through the practice of an attention of perception, an obedience in feeling and a largeness of thought. Every teaching of the sacred speaks of an aspect of human beings and of the whole of creation which exists at depth or in potential as the unmanifest, spiritual quality or as that portion of divinity, which has no beginning and no end, and, which is not born and which does not die. This more subtle layer of meaning underlies all that we ordinarily encounter, yet we are not usually aware of it. No teaching attempts to prove the existence of the eternal for the satisfaction of the ordinary temporal mind, but instead seeks to establish an awareness of it and to nurture the connection with it in human beings.

An aspirant may find a relationship with this more readily by following a path laid by those sages who have understood reality more deeply, because it cannot be known by the ordinary mind and requires the sacrifice of a dependence on this level of the mind. In giving up an attachment to the usual self-occupations and to habitual and accustomed ways of thinking and of attending to the self, to others and to the world and in seeking a more subtle layer of awareness, an individual may be open to new ways of being in every situation and may move towards an experience of that level of existence, both internally and externally, which is not at the level of the psycho-physical body and which is not therefore subject to death.

Having realized Atman, which is soundless, intangible, formless, undecaying, and likewise tasteless, eternal, and odourless; having realized that which is without beginning and end, beyond the Great, and unchanging--one is freed from the jaws of death.

Katha Upanishad (I.iii.15)

Victory over the cycle of individual birth and death

This spiritual quality is not personal, but the awareness of it may be embodied in a particular person when the level of the

personal is sacrificed. When this quality is realized in a human being and when the person acts from this insight, then from the perspective of eternity, that perspective which is outside the linear and causal sequence of events, the purpose of the person's life is accomplished. If a person, in life, that is, within a particular body, becomes substantially related to the eternal, then that individual can be said to have found eternal life or to have become liberated from the bondage of the personal and the human cycle of time. In some cultures the cycle of time available to an individual is understood to be limited to the time between birth and death and in others it includes the time after death and may involve many cycles of death and rebirth. In either case the physical death of an individual is not regarded to be as important an event as the spiritual or virgin birth, which itself requires the giving up of a self-centred existence with its exclusive interest in the satisfaction of desires and the avoidance of suffering at the level of personal reward and punishment. And it is the actualization of this understanding, which is called a spiritual birth before death and which requires a dying before death, which constitutes the victory over death.

So when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory.

(I Corinthians 15.54)

The spiritual perspective claims that the meaning of a human life or of a physical birth is fulfilled when the dethronement of the ego is accomplished before the physical death so that the life of the individual, including the ego, may serve a more inclusive and larger perspective. The last moment when this transformation of human consciousness or liberation from the cycle of time could take place in a lifetime is at the moment of death. The new life, which has nothing to do with time or with the body can only be produced by human beings in time and in the body. The ritual of the last rites in the church or the rituals of transcendence in The Tibetan Book of the Dead are concerned

4/11/11

with the possibility of the person becoming related to a subtler level of reality in the process of transition from the physical body.

The question of the meaning of human existence gains importance in the face of death, the end of human existence. Without death and without an awareness of our own mortality and the limit of our time, we would not try to understand the significance of life. Yet even recognizing the inevitability of our own death, we often avoid this question by extending our time to include what happens after death. The expectation of reward or punishment for the self in an afterlife or of a higher or lower manifestation in the next life, often made in a religious context, is a significant secular response to the concern about the future by the mind which cannot not assume a continuation of personal time.

This is not the concern of spiritual teachers, who when asked about what happens at death or after death, instead of answering, are likely to ask: "Why are you alive?" And although the great masters are often able to heal sickness and to prolong life, they seldom make use of this ability. They are more interested in the transformation of being, in new birth and in eternal life than they are in the continuation of this life. In the parable of the mustard seed the Buddha did not cure the woman's son, nor did he reassure her with stories of time after death. He brought her to an awareness of the end of time and thus to a recognition of the need to understand and to bring to life the questions about the meaning of time, saying:

That one who delights in children and cattle,
That one whose heart adheres thereto,
Death takes that man and goes his way,
As sweeps away a mighty flood a sleeping village...

Though one should live a hundred years,
Not seeing the Region of the Deathless,
Better were it for one to live a single day,
The Region of the Deathless seeing...⁶

What is a human life and what is it for? What is the end of human life? An acute and ongoing awareness of death as an

inevitable and common human experience and which ends the time of any particular embodiment of life, is not necessarily a morbid occupation, but one which has the possibility of bringing about a transformation of consciousness, which then responds to these questions differently. And although Socrates taught that the practice of philosophy was a preparation for dying, it may also be said that an awareness of death is a preparation for a real philosophic inquiry which seeks to understand the meaning of life.

Endnotes:

1. This story is told in Burtt, p. 43-46.
2. Epicurus, Letter to Menoeceus in Cahn, S. (Ed.) (1990) Classics of western philosophy. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing.
3. Both of these very different perspectives are ours.
4. ...or of the lack of good nutrition. In Woody Allen's film Sleeper, the main character woke up after a sleep of 200 years and asked where his friends were. When he was told they were dead, he cried: "How can that be? They always ate organic brown rice."
5. As an increasing number of people wish to die with some control over their lives and with dignity, there is a greater number of suicides and an increasing demand for a system which would allow some form of assistance-in-dying or euthanasia for those whose lives are no longer of an acceptable quality. Although this represents an unwillingness to suffer the kind of negative results of an impersonal medical system, it places the primary value on the possibility of a conscious participation and control of the course of one's life rather than on the need to understand the significance of life and the events which take place. In this sense it is a spiritual matter. There are also many difficult ethical problems which will arise whether such a system is accepted or not.
6. Quoted in Burtt, p.46.

65 April

Bibliography

Burtt, E.A. (Ed.) 1955. The teachings of the compassionate Buddha. New York: New American Library.

Chidester, David. 1990. Patterns of transcendence: Religion, death, and dying. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing.

Epicurus. Letter to Monoceus. in Cahn, S. (Ed.) 1990. Classics of western philosophy. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing.

Fremantle, Francesca and Trungpa, Chogyam. (trans. and commentary) 1975. The Tibetan book of the dead. Boulder, CO: Shambhala.

Freud, Sigmund. "Thoughts for the Times on War and Death" in The Pelican Freud Library, Vol.12 Civilization, society and religion. 1985. London: Penguin.

Kubler-Ross, Elisabeth. 1969. On death and dying. New York: MacMillan.

Kubler-Ross, Elisabeth. 1975. Death: The Final Stage of Growth. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Loudon, John. "Immortality: More than intimations?" in Parabola Vol.II, 1. 1977 (p.106-111).

Moody, Raymond. 1975. Life after life. Atlanta: Mockingbird Books.

Muldoon, Francis. March 1981. "Criteria for the determination of death" Law Reform Commission of Canada Report, Ottawa, ON: Government of Canada.

Nikhilananda, Swami. (ed.) 1964. The Upanishads, New York: Harper & Row.

Plato. The Apology, Phaedo, in The last days of Socrates, trans. by Hugh Tredennick. 1984. London: Penguin.

Ring, Kenneth. 1982. Life at death. New York: Quill.

Sandars, N.K. 1972. The epic of Gilgamesh: An English version. London: Penguin.

Steindl-Rast, David. "Learning to die" in Parabola Vol.II, 1. 1977 (p.22-31).

