

As this issue of *Yoga Scotland Magazine* is set about the theme of the Crone, we ask monk and respected Vedanta teacher Swamini Brahmajprajnananda Saraswati whether she feels Indian thought differs from Western thought on the subject of ageing and death, and what Vedanta can teach us about how to age and die well.



the vedantic art of living and dying

by swamini b

Although I avoid stereotyping, I would say that Indian thought and Western thought each come from a deeper philosophy about the person, the world and God.

- Western thought says that you have only one life which ends with death. Indian thought says that time is cyclical, you have been through many lifetimes and death is just an event.
- Western thought presents the goal of life as wealth, pleasure, relationships, and possible salvation after death. Indian thought consider

the goal of life as *moksha* (liberation). For this we prepare ourselves through valid pursuits like wealth, pleasure and ethics as the foundation of all.

- Western thought probably says that you are limited and limitations have to be managed. Indian thought says that you are limitless, free enough to have a limited body with which you can do wonders.

In a recent Indian movie called *Bala*, the protagonist – a young 25-year-old man seeking a romantic partner – is dealing with premature hair loss and balding.

As he rues his loss, he quips to his friend – hair loss means identity loss!

In our experience, ageing or any changing condition of the body is difficult to deal with because it indicates some loss for us – loss of youth, loss of looks, loss of health, loss of significance. We struggle with loss because it seems to overwhelm us and makes us feel less.

The Bhagavad Gita is a timeless dialogue between Bhagavan Krishna and Arjuna, or one could say a dialogue between Ishvara, God, and the individual. The dialogue in the form of questions and answers is really a flow of knowledge revealing our timeless reality, the reality of the body and our relationship to it. In response to the student who is seeking a permanent solution to sorrow, the teacher says that there is no legitimate reason for sorrow and the wise do not grieve, and elaborates on four reasons:

1. As for the in-dweller of the body (*jiva*) there is childhood, youth and old age, similarly there is the gaining of body. A helpful metaphor is offered – just as a person gives up old clothes and takes up new ones, so does the Self, the one who dwells in the body, give up old bodies for new.

Some may say that they don't believe in rebirth as their conclusion is based on perception. But the Veda reveals that which we cannot figure out ourselves i.e., rebirth. Supportive evidence exists in the form of past-life regression analysis as well as uncannily accurate astrology readings.

2. For that which has birth there is death, and for that which has death birth is certain. This truth of life has no remedy. While there may be some cure for different diseases, there is no cure for the condition of death.

If change is the constant in life then it is possible that we are resisting that change in the form of ageing, old age and death. Our sadness and helplessness are reactions to facts.

Reaction is a refusal to accept the facts. If we learn to be in harmony with reality, then we will not resist that which is inevitable. In seeing what is, we stop resisting.

3. Again and again it is pointed out that you are the timeless reality, different from your body. And hence the condition of the body does not define you. You define something by what is intrinsic to it, not what is incidental to it. Death is an incident – an event at best.

To better assimilate this reality, Vedanta has to be systematically studied with a guru, traditionally by listening to the teachings. Through 700 verses, the dialogue of *Bhagavad Gita* continued until Arjuna understood that there was no reason to grieve and discovered that he was always free!

So, what does the Indian framework offer us in how we can live our lives?

1. See yourself as an instrument of change.

The Sanskrit word for body is *bahya karana* (outer instrument) and mind is *antah karana*, inner instrument. The instrument does not function on its own but is wielded by the one who has the instrument, the individual who can use his body and mind. Hence you are the one who uses your body and mind as instruments.

The next question is, instrument for what? You say change. And so I ask you: *What is the change you want to create in the world?*

The reply to this question determines life-purpose and hence how one will live.

Suppose you say “earn a decent living, have a healthy body and mind through my yoga practice, have fulfilling relationships and grow spiritually”. How will you do this? Life involves relating, hence we relate to some people as partner, son, daughter, professional, yoga teacher and so on.

Enter dharma into the picture! Dharma, being a universal framework of laws and principles, is the basis for the pursuit of wealth and pleasure. Everyone wants money but the means we use [to acquire it] will be ethical. Most people want to sustain a romantic relationship, but the foundation of it will be dharma in the form of honest communication, showing care and accommodation of the other person.

Dharma is not religion nor does it involve obsessing about one role and expecting all needs to be fulfilled by a romantic partner. Dharma is about fulfilling your responsibilities in

your many roles with much care and contributing to the growth and happiness of the people around you. Bringing dharma into our actions (justice, kindness, compassion, cheerfulness) makes everyone happy. The yama-s and niyama-s in the *Yoga Sutras* are referring to the framework of dharma in living our lives.

You delight in being an instrument of change!

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2. Experience interconnectedness. The Indian framework of interconnectedness helpfully teaches us that we are related and indebted to five groups:

- a) People (*manushyah*),
- b) Plants and animals (*bhutih*),
- c) Ancestors (*pitri-s*),
- d) Teachers and wisdom masters (*Rishi-s*), and
- e) Deities of different phenomena (*devata-s*).

Our lives are sustained by the contributions these groups are tirelessly making and continue to make to our lives.

So, on a daily basis we acknowledge their contribution, and perform actions that sustain our relationships with them. In fulfilling our responsibilities towards them, there is a great purpose and life acquires a deeper meaning. We experience a joy of being interconnected. *Thus, you stop being a consumer and start living a life of contribution. You become an instrument of positive change, much like the flute that allows beautiful music to be played on it.* If greying hair, sagging skin, and a wrinkled face were big issues, when you view yourself as an instrument of change, this big issue of ageing becomes a small issue.

In time, big issues become small issues and small issues become non-issues.

3. See your timeless reality. Vedanta reveals that you are the timeless, limitless consciousness free from birth and death and all other changes. This is not a denial of the body but it is awakening to the reality of the body – the reality of you that cannot be negated. We use a simple logic. All that you are aware of, you are not that. The body goes through six modifications (*shad-vikaara*) – it is born, exists, grows, transforms, declines and dies. Every body, be it the body of a human being, a hippopotamus or even a virus, undergoes these changes.

If you don't become a donkey on seeing a donkey, then why would you become sad on seeing a sad thought?

That we are aware of our thoughts, emotions, desires and can actually change them, means that we are not what we see. We are more than that. The one who is sad

about ageing is the same one who was happy about his/her youthful body and the ability to do headstands and back bends. There is no way to escape sorrow as long as you identify with your body-mind.

To hear more from Swamini B, you can catch her in person at the World Yoga Festival in Reading, 30th July to 2nd August 2020, which brings together the most revered collection of teachers – an outstanding opportunity to learn from true masters. Visit yogafesitval.world for details.

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