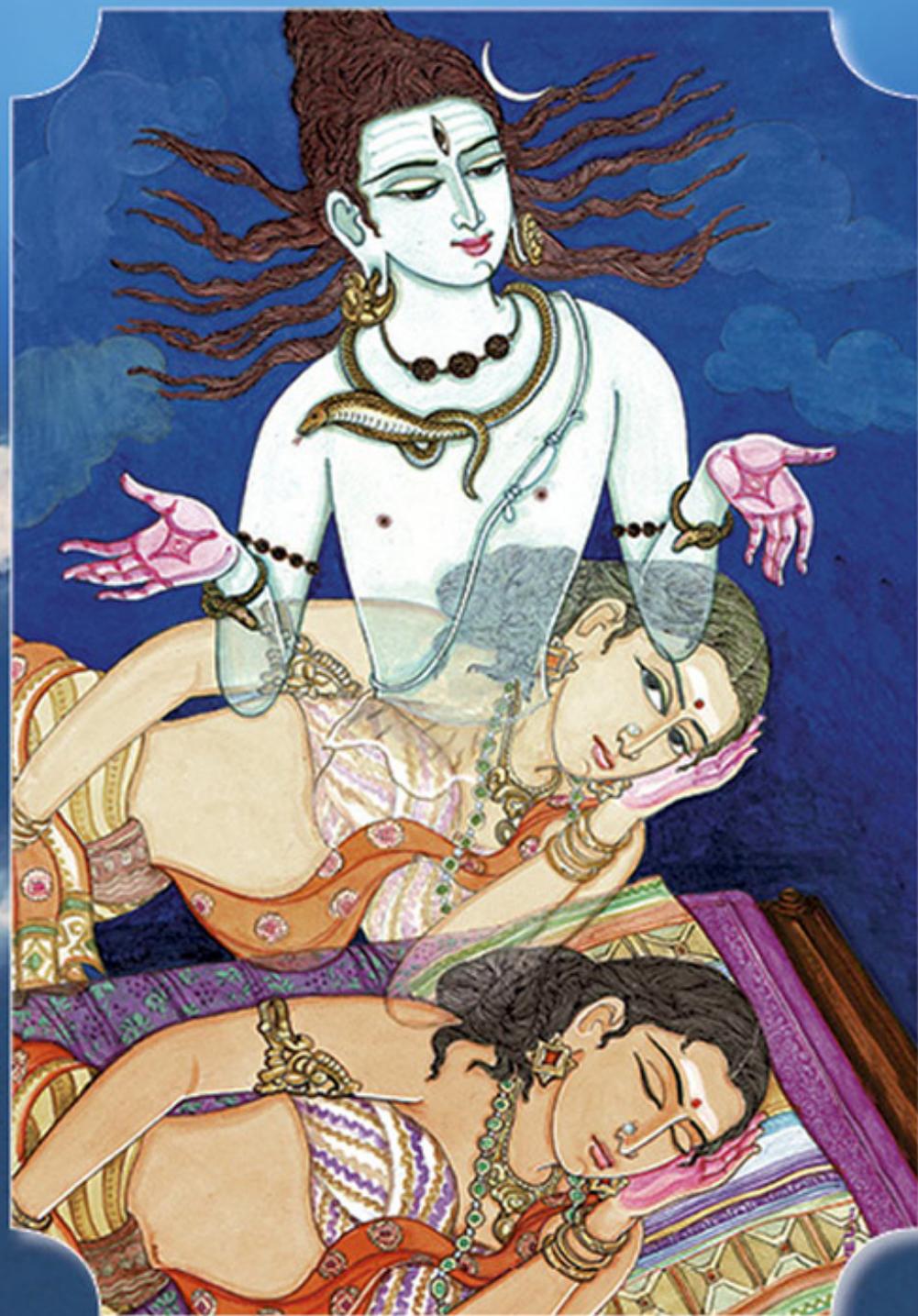


Life After Death

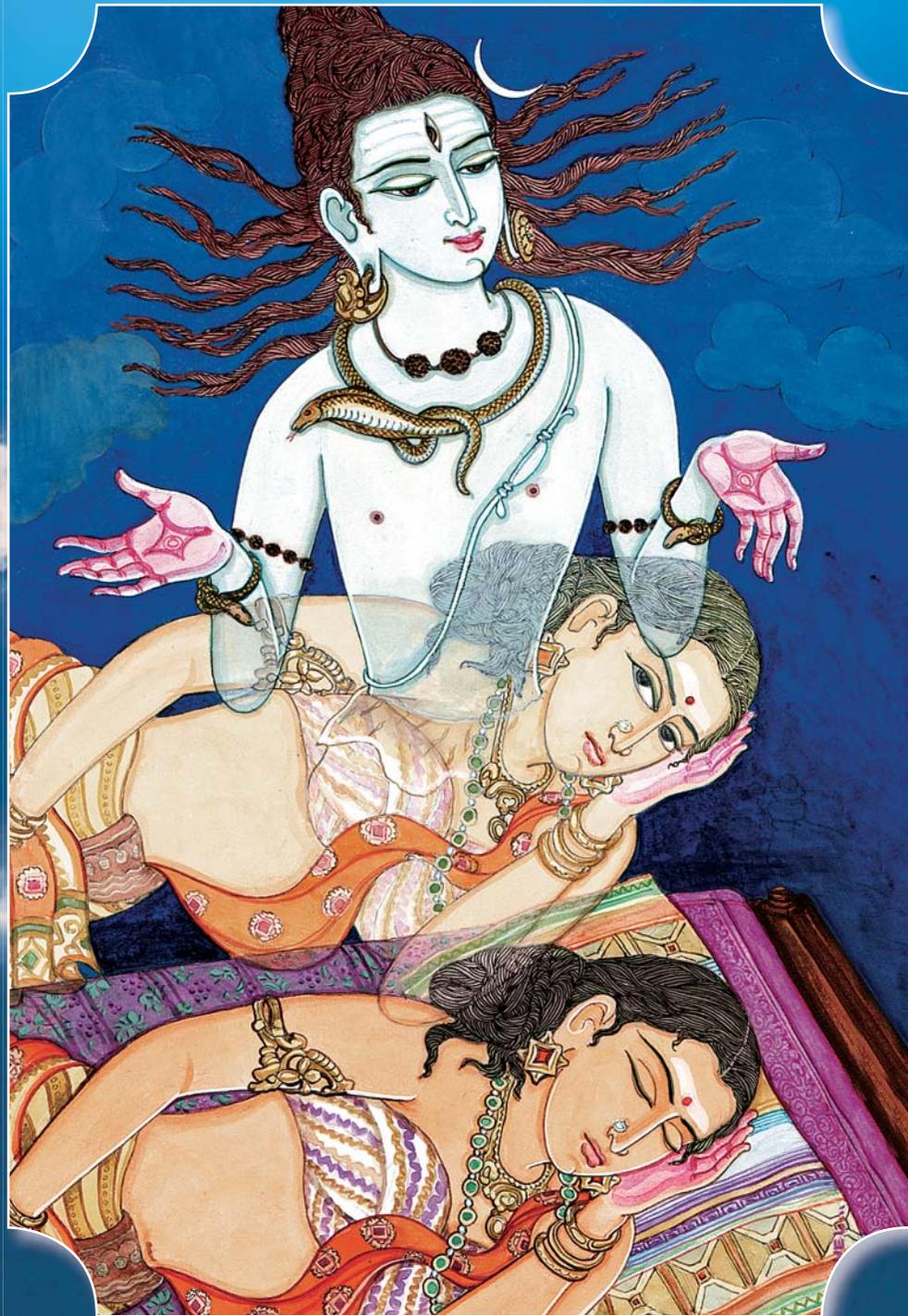
Hindu Metaphysics' Answers to
Universal Questions about the "End of Life"



ART BY A. MANIVEL, BACKGROUND PHOTO, © REL.

Life After Death

Hindu Metaphysics' Answers to Universal Questions about the "End of Life"



ART BY A. MANIVEL; BACKGROUND PHOTO, COREL

Death is the most fateful experience of each of our lives. But no Hindu really fears death, nor does he look forward to it. Death for the Hindu is merely transition, simultaneously an end and a new beginning. Over two thousand years ago Saint Tiruvalluvar wrote that "Death is like falling asleep, and birth is like awakening from that sleep." In one of the ancient languages of our religion, the physical body had a name which literally meant "that which is always dropping off." When key truths are understood and accepted about the nature of the soul and the cycles of birth, life, dying, death, afterlife and re-birth, all sense of foreboding and fear of death perish. Here we explore those realities.

What is the Eastern perspective on Death?

For Hindus, death is nobly referred to as *mahaprasthan*, the "great journey." When the lessons of this life have been learned and karmas reach a point of intensity, the soul leaves the physical body, which then returns its elements to the earth. The awareness, will, memory and intelligence which we think of as ourselves continue to exist in the soul body. Death is a most natural experience, not to be feared. It is a quick transition from the physical world to the astral plane, like walking through a door, leaving one room and entering another. Knowing this, we approach death as a *sadhana*, as a spiritual opportunity, bringing a level of detachment which is difficult to achieve in the tumult of life and an urgency to strive more than ever in our search for the Divine Self. At death we drop off the physical body and continue evolving in the inner worlds in our subtle bodies, until we again enter into birth. We are not the body in which we live but the immortal soul which inhabits many bodies in its evolutionary journey.

What is this "soul" which never dies?

Our individual soul is the immortal and spiritual body of light that animates life and reincarnates again and again until all necessary karmas are created and resolved and its essential unity with God is fully realized. Our soul is God's emanational creation, the source of all our higher functions, including knowledge, will and love. Our soul is neither male nor female. It is that which never dies, even when its four outer sheaths change form and perish as they naturally do. The soul body has a form just as the astral body has a form, but it is more refined and is of a more permanent nature. It is this body which reincarnates, creating around itself new physical and astral bodies, life after life after life. This process matures and develops the body of the soul. The body of the soul is pure light, made of quantum. It is indestructible. It cannot be hurt or damaged in any way. It is a pure being, created by God, maturing its way to Him in final merger. The body of the soul is constant radiance. Its mind is superconsciousness, containing all intelligence, and is constantly aware, does not sleep and is expanding awareness as the soul body matures. The body of the soul lives in the eternity of the moment, simultaneously conscious of past and future as a one cycle. The true nature, everlasting secure personal identity, is realizing oneself as the soul body. This is truly finding our roots, our source, our indestructible, ever-maturing soul.

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In the illustration at left, a woman has just died. Her immortal soul, above the physical body, is releasing itself to continue its evolution in the inner worlds and to assume its next reincarnation at the right time. Lord Siva gives blessings at this crucial moment of transition.

What are the five bodies?

In Sanskrit, the bodies of our being are called *kosa*, which means "sheath, vessel, container or layer." They are the sheaths through which the soul functions simultaneously in the various planes of existence. The *kosas*, in order of increasing subtlety, are as follows: —*anamaya kosa*: "Sheath composed of food." The physical body, coarsest of sheaths. —*pranamaya kosa*: "sheath composed of *prana* (vital force)." Also known as the etheric or health body, it coexists within the physical body as its source of life, breath and vitality, and is its connection with the astral body. —*manomaya kosa*: "Mind-formed sheath." The lower astral body. The instinctive-intellectual sheath of ordinary thought, desire and emotion. —*vijnanamaya kosa*: "Sheath of cognition." The mental or cognitive-intuitive sheath. It is the vehicle of higher thought, understanding, knowing, direct cognition, wisdom, intuition and creativity. —*anandamaya kosa*: "Body of bliss." The intuitive-superconscious sheath, the ultimate foundation of all life, intelligence and higher faculties. *Anandamaya kosa* is not a sheath in the same sense as the outer *kosas*. It is the soul itself.

The term "astral body" names the subtle, nonphysical body in which the soul functions in the astral plane. The astral body includes the *pranamaya kosa*, the *manomaya kosa* and the *vijnanamaya kosa*.

What happens at the point of death?

As the physical forces wane, all the gross and subtle energy goes into the mental and emotional astral body. If the person was prepared for death, sudden or otherwise, his mental and emotional astral body would have already been well schooled in readiness. Sudden death to such a soul is a boon and a blessing. At death, the soul slowly becomes totally aware in its astral/mental bodies, and it predominantly lives through those bodies in the astral dimension. The soul functions with complete continuity in its astral/mental bodies. It is with these sensitive vehicles that we experience dream or "astral" worlds during sleep every night.

When the physical body dies, this automatically severs the subtle silver cord that connects the astral and physical bodies. This cord is an astral-pranic thread that connects the astral body through the navel to the physical body. It is a little like an umbilical cord. During out-of-the-body experiences, this silver cord is often seen as a cord of light connecting the physical, astral and spiritual bodies. When the cord is cut at the death of the physical body, the process of reincarnation and rebirth begins. The *Vedas* say, "When a person comes to weakness, be it through old age or disease, he frees himself from these limbs just as a mango, a fig or a berry releases itself from its stalk."

It is painful to the astral body to have the physical body cut or disturbed seriously within seventy-two hours after death. The soul can see and feel this, and it detains him from going on. As soon as you tamper with his physical body, he gets attached, becomes aware that he has two bodies, and this becomes a problem. Ideally when you die, your physical body goes up in flames, and immediately you know it's gone. You now know that the astral body is your body, and you can effortlessly release the physical body. But if you keep the old body around, then you keep the person around, and he is aware that he has two bodies. He becomes earthbound, tied into the Pretaloka, and confused.

What are the inner worlds?

The Sanskrit, *loka*, means "world, habitat, realm or plane of existence." Hinduism describes three primary *lokas*, as follows. —*Bhuloka*: "Earth world." The world perceived through the five senses, also called the gross plane, as it is the most dense of the worlds. —*Antarloka*: "Inner or in-between world." Known in English as the subtle or astral plane, the intermediate dimension between the physical and causal worlds, where souls in their astral bodies sojourn between incarnations and when they sleep. —*Karanaloka*: "World of God," and of the Gods and highly evolved souls, existing deep within the Antarloka at a higher level of vibration. It is a world of superconsciousness and extremely refined energy, the quantum level of the universe.

Subdivisions of the Antarloka are: —*Devaloka*: "Place of radiant be-

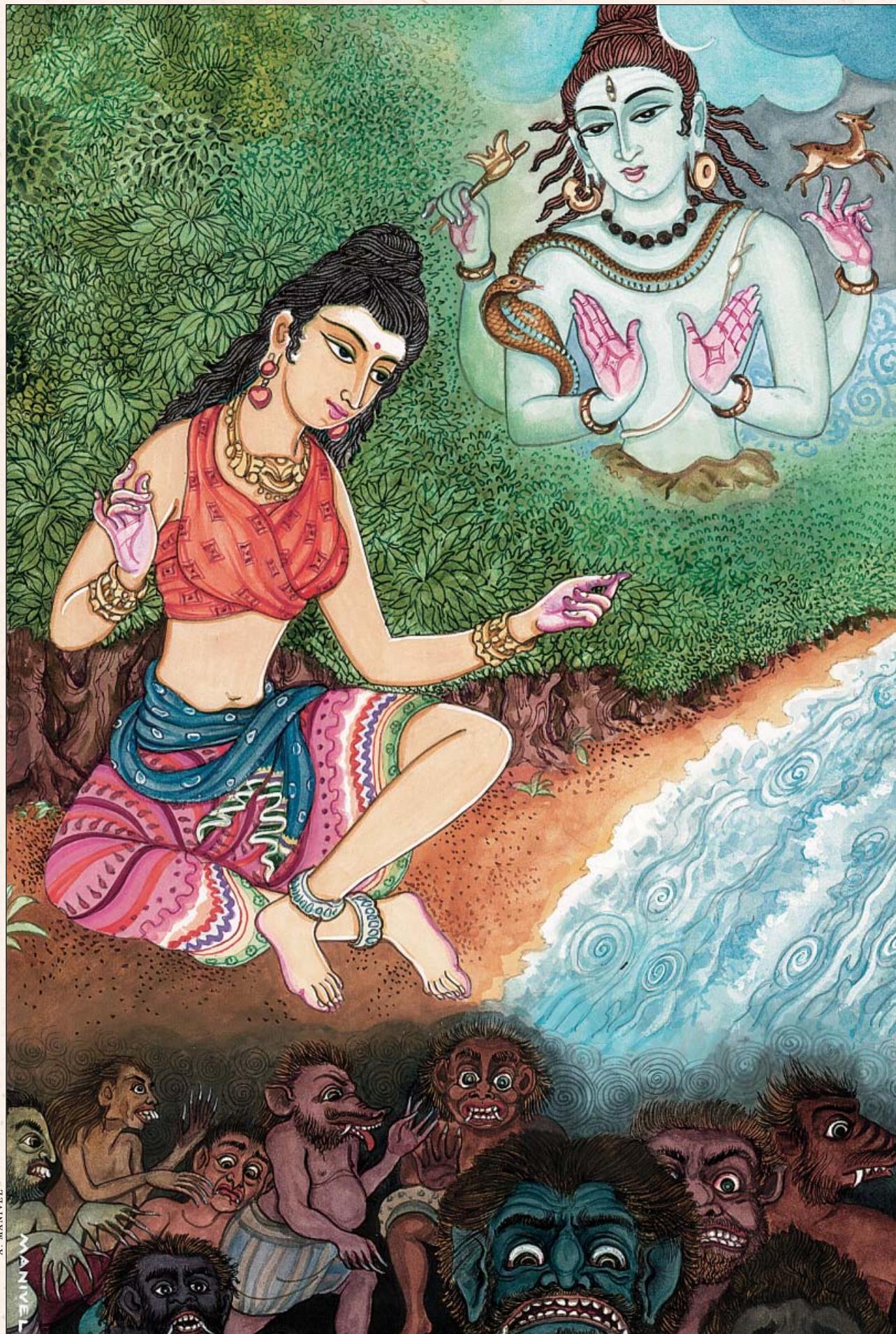
ings.” The higher astral plane, or mental plane, the realm of “angels.” —*Pretaloka*: “World of the departed.” The realm of earth-bound souls, or ghosts. It is an astral duplicate of the physical world and closest to it. —*Narakaloka*: Abode of darkness. The lower worlds, realm of “demons.” Equivalent to the Western term “hell,” a gross region of the Antarloka. A congested, distressful area where beings suffer the consequences of their own misdeeds in previous lives. Described as a place of torment, pain, darkness, confusion and disease. Narakaloka is not a place where souls reside forever. Hinduism has no eternal hell.

What determines where one goes after death?

Where the soul goes in the astral plane at sleep or death is dependent upon his earthly pursuits and the quality of his mind. If the soul body itself is evolved, it will occupy the astral/mental bodies in the Devaloka. If somebody dies in the states of anger and fear, he goes into the lower worlds of those states of consciousness. And in that realm there would be hundreds of thousands of people in that same state of consciousness. The thoughts at death are the next *samskaras* of the astral body. Even if you have the thought, “When you’re dead you’re dead,” your astral body might just float over your physical body and be “dead.” A lot of people who are about to die do not believe in life after death, so they remain hovering over their physical body when it is lifeless. Astral-plane helpers have to come and “wake them up” and tell them that their physical body is dead and explain that they are all right and are alive in their astral body. It is often not easy getting them readjusted.

At death you leave through a nerve ganglia of consciousness, a chakra. Each chakra is a window, and at death it becomes a portal, a doorway. The tunnel of light that is experienced by so many people at the point of death is the portal they are going through, the window, the chakra. Passing through the tunnel is leaving this world and going into another. So, it is the state of mind at death that gets you into one *loka* or another. At the moment of death, you have the opportunity to stabilize yourself in the highest chakra you have experienced in this life. The dying should always remember that the place where one will reincarnate is the place that he is thinking about prior to death. So, choose your desires wisely. The last thoughts just before death are the most powerful thoughts in creating the next life. Secret questionings and doubt of Hindu belief, and associations with other belief systems will automatically place him among like-minded people whose beliefs are alien to Hinduism. A nominal Hindu on Earth could be a selfish materialist in the astral world. The Hindu also knows that death must come naturally, in its own course, and that suicide only accelerates the intensity of one’s karma, placing one in a

In between: Having experienced death, a woman continues her spiritual journey in a refined area of the subtle worlds. Below her are depicted the lower regions of fear, anger and hurtfulness. The heavenly realm of the Gods is shown above and to her left.



lengthy earth-bound limbo state in the astral plane, bringing a series of immediate lesser births and requiring several lives for the soul to return to the exact evolutionary point that existed at the moment of suicide, at which time the still-existing karmic entanglements must again be faced and resolved.

What should one do to prepare for death?

Everyone is prepared to die, and whether it happens suddenly or slowly, intuitively each individual knows exactly what he is experiencing and about to experience. You don’t need any counseling. It is a blessing to know when you are going to die, because then you can prepare for it, make a decision whether you are going to be reborn, do intense *sadhanas*, make preparations. When one knows he is going to depart the physical body, he should not hesitate to tell his relatives he is going to die, and that is a wonderful blessing for them, as they can prepare for his great departure. In turn, family and friends should release him, be happy. Don’t cry; you will make him unhappy. The sadness at death comes from Western attitudes. Western thought has to be reversed. He should consciously go over his wealth, his properties, be the executor of his own will, taking care of everybody, not leaving these things to others to deal with after his passing. After everything is settled, all personal possessions disposed of, then he begins meditation and awaits the fruitful hour, trying to exit through the highest chakra of the attainment of this life.

The ideal is to leave through the top of the head, through the door of Brahman, to get into the highest heaven and not have to come back. The dying person should, at the time of transition, concentrate awareness at the top of his head and willfully draw up into it all the energies from the left and right legs and arms, one after another, then the energy within the entire torso, and all the energies within the spine, from the *muladhara* chakra, up into the third eye and crown chakras. With all the energies gathered at the top of his head, he will leave through the highest chakra he experienced this lifetime. This would put him in a great place in the inner world.

Prolonging the life of the individual body must be done by the individual himself. Medical assistance is needed to cauterize wounds and provide the numerous helpful things that are available, but to prolong life in the debilitated physical body past the point that the natural will of the person has sustained is to incarcerate, to jail, to place that person in prison. Ayurvedic medicine seeks to keep a person healthy and strong, but not to interfere with the process of death.

Should I fear death?

Our soul never dies; only the physical body dies. We are not the physical body, mind or emotions. We are the immortal soul, *atman*. We neither fear death nor look forward to it, but reverse it as a most exalted experience. Life, death and the afterlife are all part of our path to perfect oneness with God. People wonder whether death is a painful process, such as in the case of cancer victims. Cancer, which produces a lot of pain, is a process of life which results in death, but death itself is not pain-

ful. Death itself is blissful. Death is like a meditation, a *samadhi*. That’s why it is called *maha* (great) *samadhi*. A Hindu is prepared from childhood for that *mahasamadhi*. Remember, pain is not part of the process of death. That is the process of life, which results in death. Death takes place in a short period, but is a foreboding affair to those who have never meditated. But dying is not such a dramatic experience really. Every night you “die” and leave your physical body. It is very similar.

The fear of death is a natural instinctive reflex. We encounter it sometimes daily, once a month, or at least once a year when we come face to face with the possibility of obliteration of our personality and of leaving the conscious mind. The fear of change or fear of the unknown is an ominous element in the destiny of a human being. The study and comprehension of the laws of reincarnation can alleviate this fear and bring an enlightened vision of the cosmic rhythms of life and death. It is a simple process, no more fantastic than other growth problems we experience daily. Death, like birth, has been repeated so many times that it is no mystery to the soul. The only problem comes with conflicting beliefs, which produce fear and anxiety about death. This temporary ignorance soon subsides when the failing forces of the physical body reach a certain level. At this point, the superconscious intelligence, the soul itself, is there.

Why must we return to a physical body?

Certain karmas can be resolved only in the physical world. This is due to the fact that on the refined inner planes only three or four of the higher chakras are activated; the others are dormant. For *nirvikalpa* *samadhi*, all seven chakras, as well as the three major energy currents, have to be functioning to sustain enough kundalini force to burst through to the Self. At the right time, the soul is reborn into a flesh body that will best fulfill its karmic pattern. In this process, the current astral body—which is a duplicate of the last physical form—is sloughed off as a lifeless shell that in due course disintegrates, and a new astral body develops as the new physical body grows. This entering into another body is called reincarnation, “re-occupying the flesh.” Generally, the soul, at the time of conception, chooses the body he will inhabit but does not actually enter the womb until the infant body takes life and begins to move and kick.

During our numerous Earth lives, a remarkable variety of life patterns is experienced. We exist as male and female, often switching back and forth from life to life as the nature becomes more harmonized into a person exhibiting both feminine nurturing and masculine intrepidity. Therefore, the Hindu knows that the belief in a single life on Earth, followed by eternal joy or pain is utterly wrong and causes great anxiety, confusion and fear. Hindus know that all souls reincarnate, take one body and then another, evolving through experience over long periods of time. Like the caterpillar’s metamorphosis into the butterfly, death doesn’t end our existence but frees us to pursue an even greater development. Reincarnation ceases when dharma has been well performed, earthly karma is resolved, God is fully realized and moksha, liberation, is attained.

ANSWERS COMPILED FROM DANCING WITH SIVA: HINDUISM’S CONTEMPORARY CATECHISM AND MERGING WITH SIVA: HINDUISM’S CONTEMPORARY METAPHYSICS, BY SATGURU SIVAYA SUBRAMUNIYASWAMI, PUBLISHED BY HIMALAYAN ACADEMY, 107 KAHOLALELE ROAD, KAPAA, HAWAII 96746 USA. TEL: 808-240-3108; FAX: 808-822-4351; WWW.MINIMELA.COM