

Chapter 1

Questions

*'I know there is a time for coming,
And a time for going,
And that which lies between,
Yes, that is my life.'*^[1]

This verse started me thinking about my own mortality. I never thought about death when I was young. Indeed, in the arrogance of my youth I regarded death as something that only happened to other people. So I disregarded all thoughts of personal mortality. I was even impatient with those who told me of these things, because I never associated them with myself. But I was no longer young when I first heard this verse. I saw this in my reflection. I recognised this in the decline of my body functions. I recognised this in the ways my thought processes had changed with the passage of time. And I began to notice the days, the weeks, and the years flying past at an ever-increasing pace. All about me I saw those among whom I live and work ageing along with me, and some even passed away. These evidences of my own frailty and my own mortality became increasingly more evident to me. Finally, I realised deep within myself that I too will eventually die.

Realisation of my personal mortality profoundly disturbed me. It was an idea I found difficult to fully comprehend, even though my work as a physician made me familiar with the dying and the deaths of others. I specialised in anaesthesiology shortly after finishing my medical studies, and have worked as an anaesthesiologist for many years. Anaesthesiology is not just knocking people out and keeping them unconscious during operations. Anaesthesiology is also a specialisation teaching a way of thinking and managing basic body functions, so as to be able to sustain the lives of people undergoing large operations, as well as to be able to sustain the lives of desperately sick or injured people. So I knew a lot about the functioning of the human body, about the processes of life, and how to sustain life. Yet when I first heard the verse above, I knew very little about the personal consequences of dying and death, even though these things are as much a part of my life as my conception, birth, and existence.

Furthermore, my work confronted me with what I called the wonders I

saw when I administered general anaesthesia to people undergoing operations. I still call these things wonders, because I have always regarded general anaesthesia as a strange and wondrous condition. A person arrives in the operating theatre as a living, vital, conscious, speaking individual. I administer anaesthetic drugs, and suddenly the condition of this person is reduced to that of a biological mechanism. No longer a vital personality, this person has become an unconscious vacant shell, a machine made of flesh and blood undergoing repair by a surgeon. I maintain the vital functions with machines and drugs, keeping the unconscious body of this person in a functional condition, insensible to pain and to the outside world. I maintain this condition until the end of the operation. Then I cease administering some drugs, administer other drugs, and within a few short minutes consciousness and personality return. The vacant shell, the body of that person, becomes a living, vital, conscious, speaking individual again. This process still evokes a sense of wonder in my mind, despite the passage of more than twenty years during which I have administered general anaesthesia to many thousands of people. It is very similar to what I perceive when a person dies. The consciousness and breathing of the dying person finally cease, and I perceive a strange sense of absence. The body of the deceased person is present, but I, and other observers sense an absence of something in the body of the dead person. This sensation used to puzzle me. I would ask myself why I sensed an absence, and what it was that made each person a vital individual. This same sense of absence also prompted me to ask several questions such as: 'Is the conscious mind somehow different from the body? Does the conscious mind of an individual somehow continue to function, even though that person is in a state where they are no more than a vacant shell, such as during general anaesthesia, or even after death? What is the nature of this very insubstantial something called mind?'

Of all the questions I asked myself about the nature of the mind and the nature of death, the question that most occupied my thoughts was whether some part of me will survive my death. I was not alone in asking this question. Many people feel deep within themselves that there is some form of survival of the individual mind, or self, after death. Indeed, this belief in some form of life after death is so ancient, so intense, and so deep-rooted, that many people do not even question the truth of this belief. Some of those who believe in a life after death even find support for their belief in the messages a few people claim to receive from the dead. One man published the messages he claimed to have received from the dead. And one of these messages told of the nature of life after death in these words:

'We are told that those who have passed from our earth life^[2] inhabit the nearer spheres, amid surroundings not wholly dissimilar to those they have known in this world; that at death we shall enter the sphere for which our spiritual developments fits us. We shall not be plunged into forgetfulness. A human being is not transformed into another being.

In the first sphere of light we find trees and flowers like those that grow in earthly gardens; but more beautiful, immune from decay and death, and endowed with qualities that make them more completely a part of our lives. Around us are birds and animals, still the friends of man, but nearer, more intelligent, and freed from the fears and cruelties they suffer here.

We find houses and gardens, but of substance, colour and atmosphere more responsive to our presence; water whose playing is music; wide-ranging harmonies of colour. We find everything more radiant, more joyous, more exquisitely complex, and while our activities are multiplied, our life is more restful. Differences in age disappear. There are no "old" in the Spheres of Light^[3], there are only the graceful and strong.^[4]

Who would not want to live for all eternity in such a paradise? Our ancestors believed wholeheartedly in the reality of a life after death in such a paradise. Even now, many people believe they will live for eternity in such a paradise after they die. But what aspect, or what part of the body of each individual survives death to live in such a paradise? Is there really a life after death? This question of the reality of a life after death occupied my mind, just as it has occupied the minds of all people throughout all ages of man. I know this is true, because my own thought patterns, as well as the thought patterns of the society in which I live, are products of philosophies developed to answer this question.

Nonetheless, even though most people have always believed in a life after death, and even though many people still believe in a life after death, this is no proof of the truth of this belief. So I searched for signs and evidences indicating the reality of a life after death. But I am not the only person who has searched for signs and evidences of the reality of a life after death. Many others have also searched for these same signs and evidences. And throughout countless millennia, people have asked those they believed to have special knowledge about the nature of death, whether there really is a life after death.

Malunkyaputta was one of these questioners. He lived thousands of years ago in the north of India, and was greatly attracted to the teachings of the great religious teacher called Siddhartha Gautama, who later became known as 'the Buddha'.^[5] Malunkyaputta told the Buddha that he would lead a life according to the teachings of the Buddha, if the Buddha could tell him whether the body and the soul were identical, whether the soul

continues to live after death, and whether the world is eternal. The Buddha answered these questions of Malunkya-putta with a parable:

‘Consider the situation of a man who is brought to a surgeon after being shot by a poisoned arrow. This man refuses to let the surgeon treat him, saying: “I refuse to allow my wounds to be treated until I know the name of the man who shot me, his age, whether he is tall or short or of average length, what sort of family he came from, the names of his family members and his friends, what the bow looks like with which he shot me, the materials used to make the bow, the type of arrow and the details of its construction”. This man will die before he learns the answers to all his questions.’^[6]

The answer to the problem faced by the man shot with the poisoned arrow was simple; the arrow had to be removed before his body absorbed a lethal quantity of poison from the arrow. This man did not have enough time to learn the answers to all his questions. Furthermore, knowledge of the answers to his questions was quite irrelevant to his treatment. Speedy removal of the arrow was all that was needed. The Buddha told Malunkya-putta with this parable, that answers to his questions were quite irrelevant to decide how to conduct his life. In addition, the Buddha told Malunkya-putta with this parable, that no-one could learn the answers to his questions during a short individual human life span.

This parable disappointed me. It is evasive. It did not answer my question whether there is some sort of life after death. Even so, no-one has ever found a better answer, despite the efforts of many scientists, philosophers, and theologians during the millennia since Malunkya-putta asked the Buddha this question. So I searched for other indications of a life after death.

Many people believe in God, an all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-pervading creator of all that exists within the universe. They also believe that God chose certain people as prophets and messengers, and that these people were inspired by God to write books containing the word of God. There are many religions, each with its own holy books, and all contain the word of God according to the believers in these religions. And the holy books of many religions told me that life after death is not a matter of belief, but a fact. Yet these holy books, as well as the believers in these religions could offer me neither proofs of the reality of God, nor any proofs of the reality of a life after death, only their faith in the reality of God, and their faith in the reality of a life after death. I am a practical man. I was dissatisfied with the thought I had to blindly believe what these books told me. I was dissatisfied with mere blind belief in God and a life after death, when there was no proof for any of these things. I refused to simply believe in a life after death, only because of what God supposedly told people through

the writings of the prophets. And even though people have always believed in the reality of a God, and a life after death, this did not necessarily mean any of these things are true.

There were also people who told me they did not believe in any form of life after death. These people considered themselves to be logical and realistic people who based their lives only upon the evidence of what they could sense and measure. But these people could also offer me no proofs of their belief that there is no life after death. Often, they could not even explain why they believed there is no life after death. Many had only a deeply rooted belief in the absence of a life after death. And those who were able to formulate reasons for their belief in the absence of a life after death, could only offer analogies, and the absence of evidence for a life after death, but no proofs. In fact, their belief was based upon no more than the fact that centuries of observation, and scientific research, had failed to reveal the reality of God, or any evidence for a life after death. But such a lack of evidence for any of these things is not proof that these things do not exist.

All this questioning confirmed a sad truth. Despite many millennia of intense questioning and intellectual effort, there was still no real proof of a life after death. All my uncertainties remained. Such uncertainty about the reality of a life after death stimulated my curiosity. I wanted proof of a life after death. So I searched for signs indicating the possibility of a life after death, and I found several signs and evidences indicating the possibility of a life after death.

For example, there are indications that there is more to this world than can be experienced or perceived with the senses, or even detected with exquisitely sensitive measuring apparatus. These are indications provided by apparently inexplicable events, phenomena, and wonders such as out-of-body experiences, the ability to see an aura of light surrounding each human body, and paranormal senses. The stories and experiences of some people also seem to indicate that a life after death is possible. For example, some people say they can see and communicate with the dead, while others say they have visited the universe inhabited by the dead. These people really do perceive these things, and really have undergone such experiences. Many people even believe these perceptions, and these experiences, are windows giving the living a vision of the eternity awaiting each person after death. All these things are apparent proofs of the reality of wondrous immaterial aspects to the universe. And throughout many ages, many people believed these things were not only proof of immaterial aspects to the universe, but also proof of the reality of a life after death. Indeed, many believers in a life after death desperately hold these apparently inexplicable events, phenomena, and wonders before them. They listen to stories about

these things, tell and retell them, and they are glad. They cherish their belief in these things, because their belief in these things liberates them from the oppressive transience of this mortal life, offering them the comforting prospect of eternal life after bodily death. So they do not critically analyse these events, phenomena, and wonders, to discover whether they truly are signs indicating the reality of a life after death.

I did not dismiss all these things as fantasies and hallucinations. People reporting these experiences are seldom insane or hysterical. They really do undergo these things, and they really do perceive these things. They are reasons why many people believe in a life after death. But these things are also not necessarily proof of a life after death. I was too critical to blindly believe that strange and unexplained experiences, perceptions, phenomena, communications, and wonders were proof of the reality of a life after death. Such things could only be considered proof of a life after death, if they could not be explained by anything else except a life after death. I wanted to be able to explain, and to understand these things, so as to learn whether there really is a possibility of a life after death.

Every living person will eventually die. But death is not an instantaneous transition from being alive to being dead. Nor is death an instantaneous transition from this life to a life in some unseen, and uncertain life after death. People must first die before they are dead. During my work as a physician I see the injured, the sick, and the dying. I hear of the deaths of people known to those with whom I speak. I hear of the deaths of people whom I know. And sometimes I see people die. Some people die peacefully, while others die horribly; but everyone eventually dies. I wanted to know why people die. What is dying? How do the minds of dying people function? How do dying people sense the world around them? What do dying people experience? How does the process of dying modify these experiences? I wanted to know all these things.

To learn these things was not just an abstract intellectual exercise on my part. My thinking, and reading about these things filled me with an ever-increasing sense of the evanescence of my own life. I felt oppressed by the imminence of my own mortality. So I wanted to learn these things, because I realised that I too will eventually die. I wanted to learn about the experience of dying so as to better understand my own sensations when I die. I wanted to learn how the process of dying could affect the way I will see and experience the world about me when I die. I wanted to learn how the process of dying could affect my thinking and my emotions as I die. I wanted to learn whether there was some sort of life after death. I wanted to learn these things so that I could better understand what my family members are undergoing should they die before I die. I wanted to learn these things so I could better understand the experiences of other dying

people. Finally, I realised that all my questioning and searching could be expressed in three questions:

1. What is the true nature of death?
2. What will I experience as I die?
3. Will some part of me survive my death?

So I began a systematic study of the true nature of dying and death to find answers to these questions. I believed, and I believe even more firmly now, that knowing answers to these aspects of human life allows me to conduct my life according to a philosophy based upon facts, and not upon blind faith. I believe such knowledge gives me a better understanding of my fellows and myself. I believe such knowledge gives me a better understanding of my relationship to the universe. I believe such knowledge is well worth knowing. And I believe other people also want to know these things.