

# A PHYSICAL CONQUEST OF DEATH?

by Dr. Ananda Reddy

## ABSTRACT

*Since time immemorial man has been in quest of immortality but, as yet, he has not succeeded in a physical conquest of death.*

*Death is at present a metaphysical and a physical necessity. Individual life is only a formation of the All-Force and Power; it is a phase in the process of the self-limitation of the Infinite. The process of self-limitation is the process of putting the three badges of limitation : Death, Desire, and Incapacity. Therefore, individuation itself means the beginning of incapacity and incapacity is the root of all desire, and desire is at the base of death.*

*At the present stage of evolution, death is not only a necessity but even a helper. It is the greatest catalyzer of human evolution.*

*Biologically, all living matter possessed in the beginning immortality and death was adopted at a later stage for the simple reason that such a 'safety valve' was needed for perpetuating the race or the species.*

*Hence, as death is only a transitory solution of Nature's evolutionary process, it is not necessary that it is a permanent or an unalterable law of life in the future. With a change or evolution of human consciousness beyond the stage of mental consciousness, it is possible to conquer death which is a necessary component of evolution up to the level of the mental consciousness. Sri Aurobindo envisions that when man reaches the Supramental Consciousness, which is Truth-Consciousness in itself, he will not have to undergo the process of death anymore. Hence, the Supramental Consciousness alone can annul death and Sri Aurobindo says that humanity is slowly moving toward its destiny of Superhumanhood.*



## LIFE ONLY IS ...

In order to understand death we have first to understand what life is, or does it matter at all where we start, for, as writes Sri Aurobindo:

*Life, death - death, life; the  
words have led for ages  
Our thought and consciousness  
and firmly seemed  
Two opposites; but now  
long-hidden pages  
Are opened, liberating  
truths undreamed.  
Life only is, or death  
is life disguised,  
Life a short death until by life  
we are surprised.<sup>1</sup>*

### a) Metaphysical Truth of Life

Life, in its universal form, is cosmic Energy, a ceaseless dynamic movement endlessly creating and disintegrating individual forms which are its outermost material expressions. Life is imperishable and eternal which, "even if the whole figure of the universe were quite abolished", says Sri Aurobindo, "would itself still go on existing and be capable of producing a new universe in its place, must indeed, unless it be held back in a state of rest by some higher power or hold itself back, inevitably go on creating".<sup>2</sup> The whole universe is nothing but Life in the form of Matter. It is everywhere, omnipresent, involved or evolved, visible or invisible, manifest or unmanifest, only differing in its expression. It is the same in the atom to

man, in the plant and animal, in the mountain and proton. It is in reality the Consciousness-Force which reveals itself in a submental awareness. Life is the middle stage of the self-revealing Consciousness-Force, the first stage being that of Matter where it is entirely subconscious and seems wholly mechanical, the third being the stage of conscious mentality. "Life, as this intermediate energising of conscious being, liberates into sensitive action and reaction a form of the creative force of existence which was working subconsciously or inconsciously, absorbed in its own substance; it supports and liberates into action the apprehensive consciousness of existence called mind and gives it a dynamic instrumentation so that it can work not only on its own forms but on forms of life and matter; it connects too, and supports, as a middle term between them, the mutual commerce of the two, mind and matter."<sup>3</sup>

Supermind or the Real-Idea, the Knowledge-Will, is the determinative form and creative agent of Sachchidananda. Being so, it renders the Consciousness-Force into ordered forms and ordered harmony which constitute the universe. Hence, Matter, Life and Mind are the same Consciousness - Force, Chit-Shakti, but "operating for the maintenance of distinctly individual forms in a sort of demarcation, opposition and interchange in which the soul in each form of being works out its own mind and life as if they were separate from the others, though in fact, they are never separate but are the play of the one Soul, Mind,



Life in different forms of its single reality.”<sup>4</sup>

So, ordinarily when we speak of life, we mean the ‘distinctly individual forms’ which are in opposition to each other. In animals, we see life breathing, moving, eating, feeling and even desiring. In plants too there is the same life, as pointed out by the Indian physicist, Jagadishchandra Bose, expressing itself in almost the same manner. They too respond to love and music, they too have feelings of like and dislike as shown by recent experiments on plants which could detect a thief or someone with vibrations of violence. Jagadishchandra Bose has also affirmed an identical state of life in minerals. Modern physics is on the verge of declaring that there is no rigid line of demarcation between plant and metal, between metal and stone, between the elements and atoms.

#### b) Scientific View of Life

As a matter of fact, biological sciences too cannot throw more light on the question of what life is. The sciences have at the most defined some characteristics of life at different stages of higher and lower organisms, but, they have not found any universally valid criteria pertaining to life. Stanley Miller writes in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (Vol.3): “While there is little difficulty in telling whether a higher organism is alive, there is no agreement as to what characteristics would be required for the most primitive organisms in order to call them living.” Charles Singer admits, “It is still doubtful whether a virus can be

described as living and, indeed, as to what we mean by living.”<sup>5</sup>

George E. Hutchinson gives a very vague description of what life is: “The necessary and sufficient condition for an object to be recognizable as a living organism, and so to be the subject of biological investigation, is that it be a discreet mass of matter, with a definite boundary, undergoing continual interchange of material with its surroundings without manifest alteration of properties over short periods of time...”<sup>6</sup>

### DEATH IS LIFE DISGUISED

#### a) Death as a Metaphysical Necessity

Neither life nor death are definable, because death is ingrained in life, it is its base, its dark foundation. At every moment of life, death is inextricably mingled with it. It is difficult to know where life ends and death begins. It is as if every biological form dies continuously in order to live constantly. It is only at the ‘end’ that ‘something’ happens to the corporeal form and we declare the body to be ‘dead’. Perhaps our definitions of ‘death’ or ‘dead’ are not the same. Death is the keeper of Truth, it does not let enter into the realm of Truth all that is not pure and true. Death is the dissolution of falsehood, and ‘dead’ is only a process of this dissolution.



*"Death is a stair, a door,  
a stumbling stride  
The soul must take to cross  
from birth to birth,  
A gray defeat pregnant with  
victory,  
A whip to lash us towards our  
deathless state." 7*

As Sri Aurobindo puts it, "Birth is the first spiritual mystery of the physical universe, death is the second which gives it double point of perplexity to the mystery of birth, for life, which would otherwise be a self-evident fact of existence, becomes itself a mystery by virtue of these two which seem to be its beginning and its end and yet in a thousand ways betray themselves as neither of these things, but rather intermediate stages in an occult process of life." 8

What is this process of life which makes death a metaphysical as well as a physical necessity? If the life-force issues forth from the universal Life and this in turn is a projection of the Consciousness-Force of Sachchidananda, how is that the individual life-force is subject to death? What is the metaphysical explanation? Sri Aurobindo gives the following explanation.

First factor is, 'the individual against the All.' As we have noted, individual life is only a formation of the All-Force and Power; it is a phase in the process of the self-limitation of the Limitless, the Infinite. The process of self-limitation is the process of putting on 'the three

badges of its limitation - Death, Desire and Incapacity.' Therefore, individuation means the beginning of incapacity and incapacity is the root of all desire, wanting to be more capable, and desire is at the base of death.

Second factor is 'the individual versus all other'. It is obvious that the process of individuation of the All-Force gives birth continually to numberless multitudes of life-forces, each having its particular individual frame, character, place, time and role in the play of the universe. In trying to fulfill its role in this welter of action and movement, the individual form has to withstand multipronged attacks from other individual forms. It becomes a ruthless battlefield for survival, for, each form is trying to prey upon the energies and lives of other forms. But, in the occult as well as the physical balance of Nature, no individual form can be only an 'eater' - it has to become the 'food' for others: 'the eater eating is himself eaten'. As the Taittiriya Upanishad puts it: "I am food! I am the eater of food!" Or, as Sri Aurobindo explains it, "The life organized in the body is constantly exposed to the possibility of being broken up by the attack of the life external to it or, its devouring capacity being insufficient or not properly served or there being no right balance between the capacity of devouring and the capacity or necessity of providing food for the life outside, it is unable to protect itself and is devoured or is unable to renew itself and therefore wasted away or broken; it has to go through the process of death for a new construction or renewal." 9



The third factor is 'action and reaction.' It is but a logical step to imagine that these individual forms although limited by incapacity and desire and death, seek to expand and increase themselves, even if it means at the cost of others. In such a tendency 'however strong the mastering life, unless either it is unlimited or else succeeds in establishing a new harmony with its environment, it cannot always resist and triumph but must one day be overcome and disintegrated.'<sup>10</sup>

The fourth factor is 'life and consumer'. In the same image of the Upanishad, life-force is the food of the body, and the body the food of the life-force. That is to say, the life-force provides the food necessary for the body's building up, maintenance and self-renewal. At the same time, the life-force demands its share from the body: the life-energy, imprisoned in the individual center, draws upon the substantial form of itself which it has developed and maintained. However, "if the balance between these two operations is imperfect or is disturbed or if the ordered play of the different currents of life force is thrown out of gear, then disease and decay intervene and commence the process of disintegration."<sup>11</sup>

The fifth factor is 'life at war with body'. Although the individual seems externally to be a whole, there are in him different parts: mind, heart center, body, subconscious parts, superconscious parts etc. - an amalgam of many parts which pull the individual in different directions. This way, 'the Life is at war with the

body, it attempts to force it to satisfy life's desires, impulses, satisfactions and demands from its limited capacity what could only be possible to an immortal and divine body, and the body, enslaved and tyrannized over, suffers and is in constant dumb revolt against the demands made upon it by the Life."<sup>12</sup>

With the appearance of the mind on the scene, it too seeks to be satisfied and has its demands on life and body. There is an increasing demand on the life energy which disrupts the original balance of demand and supply and this imbalance creates many disorders which shorten the life span of the individual.

The sixth factor is the difference of poise between the Purusha and Prakriti on each level of the being. In the terminology of the Upanishad, man is made up of four different personalities: the physical personality or the annamaya purusha, the vital personality or the pranamaya purusha, the mental personality or the manomaya purusha and the central individual self being in essence one with the Divine, the chaitya purusha. The annamaya purusha is greater in capacity than its prakriti aspect, the physical body; the pranamaya purusha is stronger than its counterpart, the vital soul. Similarly, the manomaya purusha is more capacitated than the mental energy. Finally, even the chaitya purusha exceeds in its aspiration for its complete realisation the individual formation of the moment. Thus, not only is there a division between the physical, vital and mental beings of man, but there is disparity and struggle in each being itself. And this disharmony



has its own effect of disintegration in the body.

The seventh factor is the finite's culmination in the Infinite. The most important reason that justifies the presence of Death is the necessity of the embodied self to seek infinite experience on a finite basis. "Since the form, the basis by its very organization limits the possibility of experience, this can only be done by dissolving it and seeking new forms,"<sup>13</sup> says Sri Aurobindo. As each individuation is limited in its capacities, the soul's range of experience also becomes limited. Hence, the soul has to come in successions in order to add to its fund of experience of the manifestation of the Lord. After every successive accumulation of knowledge, capacity and enjoyment, that the soul has gathered in each different birth, it stores them in its superconscious memory and thus little by little it grows and develops into the higher self, the Jivatman. At the present stage of evolution, Any change of form 'means dissolution of the body in subjection to the law and compulsion of the All-life in the material universe, to its law of supply of the material of form and demand on the material, its principle of constant inter-shock and the struggle of the embodied life to exist in a world of mutual devouring. And this is the law of Death.' <sup>14</sup>

#### **b) Death the Helper**

This then is the necessity and justification of Death, it is not a denial of Life, but only a process of Life itself: "It was the condition of matter upon

earth that has made death indispensable", says the Mother, a spiritual collaborator of Sri Aurobindo. "The whole sense of the evolution of Matter has been a growth from a first state of unconsciousness to an increasing consciousness.... A fixed form was needed in order that the organized individual consciousness might have a stable support. And yet it is this fixity of the form that made death inevitable."<sup>15</sup>

It will be easier to understand why the 'fixity of form' which was 'needed' became later that which 'made death inevitable' if we take the example of human body. In the evolutionary nisus, human aspiration has always been towards a self perfection, freedom, light and immortality. The mind of man and even the aspect of life have cooperated with his aspirations and man has made immense progress in the line of aesthetic and scientific culture. But, the physical aspect of man has been resisting, recalcitrant to any kind of change. It is partly true that the body has been neglected and was never looked upon as something that could be changed or transformed. However, this alone proves that the physical of man is a stable mould into which were poured mind, life and psychic energies since millenniums so that other and higher levels of consciousness could first be attained, then developed to reveal the Divine. But, at the stage the very stability and the dependability of the body becomes a hindrance: body was a helper, body is a bar. Beyond a certain level, the stability and rigidity so much required in the beginning stages of evolution become impediments in the



manifestation of higher truths and even in the change of the body itself. It is because of this non-plasticity, and unwillingness of the body to change itself to suit the inner growth that the embodied soul decides to discard its physical sheath and take up a new one. It is the incapacity of the body to keep pace with the inner progressive demands that invites death. If this process could be halted, the physical being made to make appreciable changes corresponding to the demands of the soul, then death need not come. But, in its present make-up, the body has its limitations and it is inevitable that death has to intervene so as to release the soul which seeks ever new experiences and enriches itself.

So, in a way, death is beneficial to the individual creature - it awakens the latter's consciousness to the need of perfection: "I, Death, am the gate of immortality"<sup>16</sup> Indeed, because of his constant efforts to go beyond death or to escape death, man's resistance and self-complacency and his slow inertia are broken. It is a catalyzer of human evolution, it evokes in man aspiration of perfection and keeps him alive to the need of immortality, the need for the transcendence of life and death.

As the Isha Upanishad explains, "Death therefore is the constant denial by the All of the ego's false self-limitation in the individual frame of mind, life and body.... It is only by accepting the oneness of the All that the individual can escape this constant and necessary denial and attain the beyond. Then All-being, All-Force, All-consciousness, All-

truth, All-delight take possession of the individual soul. It changes mortality to immortality."<sup>17</sup>

The Mother sheds greater light on this subject and would these two dichotomies, life and death, in a perfect synthesis: "Opposites are the quickest and the most effective means of fashioning Matter so that it may intensify its manifestation.... In view of this, there is evidently an analogous experience in respect of what one calls life and death. It is this kind of 'overshadowing' or constant presence of death and the possibility of death as it is said in Savitri, you have a constant companion throughout your journey from cradle to grave; you are ceaselessly accompanied by the menace or presence of Death. And along with this there is in the cells an intensity of the call for a Power of Eternity which would not be there but for this constant menace. Then one understands, one begins to feel in quite a concrete manner that all these things are only ways of intensifying the Manifestation, making it progress, making it more and more perfect. And if the ways are crude, it is because the Manifestation itself is very crude. And as it perfects itself, as it becomes more fit to manifest that which is eternally progressive, cruder means will be left behind for subtler means and the world will progress, without the need of such brutal oppositions. This is so, simply because the world is still in its childhood and human consciousness also is altogether in its childhood."<sup>18</sup>



### c) Death - A Biological Necessity

The view of biological sciences corroborates very closely with the metaphysical view propounded by Sri Aurobindo. It is interesting to see that science too believes that "From the point of view of evolutionary history, death has not been the primary phenomenon; it is rather a late comer on the scene, appearing not so much as an intrinsic and absolute necessity inhering in the very essence of living matter, as through a process of progressive 'selection' in adaptation to the welfare of the species."<sup>19</sup> In the same line of argument as forwarded by Weissmann, Michael F. Guger writes in his essay, "Reproduction": "From the stand point of survival values of the species, it is desirable for the individuals of today to give place eventually to those of tomorrow, because environing conditions are never constant for extensive periods, and it is only by giving the reproductive variants a change that new fitness may be established and prolonged survival be made possible. Insurance of the welfare of the species is the all important accomplishment."<sup>20</sup> Sri Aurobindo affirms this view of biological sciences when he writes, "Precisely because the struggle for survival, the impulse towards permanence is contradicted by the law of death, the individual is compelled, and used, to secure permanence rather for its species than for itself."<sup>21</sup> In a summing up statement, as it were, Carrington and Meader write in their book, Death, that all living matter possessed in the beginning immortality and death was

adopted at a later stage for the simple reason that such a 'safety valve' was needed for perpetuating the race or the species.

S. Metalnikov comes very close to metaphysics in his observation on the necessity of death: "The individual cells are as a rule potentially immortal, but the limitation of this principle of immortality in the case of the higher forms of organisms apparently occurs not so much due to individual physiological exigencies as to some unspecified supra-individual causes."<sup>22</sup>

Other views that support the theory of the necessity of death are the pragmatic ones. For ordinary man, with all his physical illnesses and sorrows and sufferings, physical immortality could be a curse, say the pragmatists. Secondly, "Think of the kind of life which these immortals would have to live. Century after century, millenniums after millenniums they would see the same everlasting faces, confront the same ever-recurring phenomena, engage in the same worn-out exercises... They have no future. They have nothing but never-ending now... What would they not give to migrate to some untried existence! They would be thankful even to lie down for ever in the attractive unconsciousness of the tomb."<sup>23</sup>

It must be noted here that all these views of the biological sciences apply mostly to sub-human species and not to man. Indeed with man's appearance on the earth-scene, the evolutionary process has changed completely. Till his coming, Nature was supreme and it did



its will. But, in man, the secret evolutionary Consciousness-Force has become aware of itself and man can take the lead of evolution and ascend to the divine life, to do which is his sole and true business in the world and not to fulfill the interest of the species or the race.

If, as we see in the metaphysical and the scientific views, death is not a basic and fundamental reality, but only a process of life, 'just a safety valve', and something necessary only at the present stage of man's evolution, then, cannot man ever overgrow this necessity and live immortal in a physical body? Cannot Nature ever dream of a process where it will no longer be necessary to destroy or dissolve a thing in order to progress?

## FACTORS OF DEATH

### a) Psychological Factors

We can perhaps get an answer to this problem by looking closer into the nature of death. What are the psychological and physical factors that invite the process of death? The different factors that Sri Aurobindo speaks of can be divided into five groups. First, one's attachment to the body, or for that matter anything perishable, is sure to bring death. The attachment may be with physical things, or with people, or with time past, present and future, or it does not matter what or which particular object, but any attachment is a sure harbinger of death. The very sense of attachment carries with it the shadow of death.

Secondly, the ego is the bar to immortality. The very sense of separateness from the All-Life, from the Chit-Shakti ushers in death. As the Katha Upanishad says, "He that thinks this world is and there is no other, comes again and again into Death's thralldom." Again, "Who thinks he sees difference here, from death to death he goes." As we had seen earlier, this individualization is a kind of self-limitation of the infinite and it necessitates incapacity, desire and death.

Thirdly, the individual's desire or hunger - hunger for food, material and physical things or even mind's hunger for any attainment - is sure to import death into the body. This is what the Taittiriya Upanishad means by saying:

"So, it is eaten and it eats, yea, it devours the creature that feed upon it, therefore it is called food from the eating."

Fourthly, the sex-impulse is one of the lowest forms of hunger that is Death. The hostile forces feed upon this desire of man and they survive on the act of inter-course, it is said. Each act of sexual intercourse brings one day closer to one's death. Therefore a body given to sex cannot hope of escaping the clutches of death.

Fifthly, getting stuck in Time is to succumb to death. Time and death are inseparably linked and therefore one must change one's sense of time if one is to be in the state of consciousness where waste does not exist. Waste is another name for death.



## b) Biological Immortality of Man

Biologists have their own explanation for the senescence and death of the body. Apparently, the body is such a perfect machine that it is 'intended to go forever.' Dr. Maurice Venet writes in his book, *La Vie et la Mort*, that biologically speaking and in natural conditions, that is to say, accidental violence being excluded, there should not and need not have been death at all. Viewed from the aspect of the body, death seems to us to be altogether meaningless, or, William A. Mammoud also seems to be surprised at the death of man: 'There is no physiological reason at the present day why men should die.' Dr. Gregory voices the same opinion in *Medical Prospectus*: 'such a machine as the human frame, unless accidentally depraved or injured by some external cause, would seem formed for perpetuity.'

## c) Life and Death - The Distinction

In spite of all these optimistic thinking, body still grows old and ultimately stops to function and dies. Scientists accept this fact too, the fact of death, as much as they accept the contrary. Why this confusion? Is it because of some basic difficulty in defining what is alive and what is dead? Let's analyze this problem a bit more in detail.

Jay F. Rosenberg has a very fine analysis of the problem and his logical conclusions, based on science, are extremely interesting. When a person is

supposed to be dead, we find a transition from one state of existence of the body to another state, says Rosenberg. "There are time-intervals which we find a person, still (only barely) alive, and at the end of which we find a corpse. A corpse, however is not a person. It is a person's remains."

"One consequence of this observation is that the so-called 'moment of death' is itself, once again, a merely nominal object ... There is no fact of the matter about the 'moment of death'. It is not difficult to find, say, a one-hour period at the beginning of which we confront a corpse... The 'moment of death' is a mere instant, a linguistic appearance created by one of the ways in which we, from time to time, talk and think about the deaths of persons."<sup>24</sup>

If 'the moment of death' is only a linguistic appearance, then what about the corpse which we are left with following a person's death? 'This corpse is not a person. It also did not exist prior to the person's death. So it must have come into existence at the point of that person's death. And this gives us our second question. Where does the corpse come from?'<sup>25</sup>

Rosenberg replies, "If the corpse did not spring into existence 'from nothingness', then there must have already existed something else, prior to the person's death, which changed into a corpse when the person died. Now, what might this something else be?"

"The most straight forward answer,



surely, is that what changed into a corpse was the person himself. According to this answer, a person's death is simply the event of that person's becoming a corpse. On this account, death is not a change of condition but rather a change of kind."<sup>26</sup>

Rosenberg's observations come close to what Sri Aurobindo noted; "Death has no reality except as a process of life. Disintegration of substance and renewal of substance, maintenance of form and change of form are constant process of life; death is merely a rapid disintegration subservient to life's necessity of change and variation of formal experience."<sup>27</sup>

Finally, Rosenberg concludes, "Death is an event within the history of the body. It is, to be more precise, the event of that body's becoming desouled. A corpse ... is just a desouled body."<sup>28</sup>

Normally, the doctors declare a body dead when the heart beat stops, or there is an insensibility of the eyes to light stimulus, reduction of temperature of the body, complete muscular relaxation or when rigormortis sets in the body. Curiously enough, recent scientific experiments have shown that none of the above symptoms are really final proofs of death. Joseph Leconte emphasizes this fact in the book Death: "But death? Can we detect anything returned to the forces of nature by simple death? What is the nature of the difference between the living organism and dead organism? We can detect none, physical or chemical. All the physical and chemical forces withdrawn

from the common fund of nature and embodied in the living organism seem to be still embodied in the dead, until little by little they are returned by decomposition."<sup>29</sup> Hence, the only sign of death is putrefactive decomposition. But, is it not true that the Egyptians arrested even this putrefaction of the body? So, we are back again with the confusion trying to define the difference between life and death.

The problem can perhaps be resolved in the light of Sri Aurobindo's metaphysical point of view. "The fact would seem to be," writes Sri Aurobindo, "then, that as there is a constant dynamic energy in movement in the universe which takes various material forms more or less subtle or gross, so in each physical body of object, plant or animal or metal, there is stored and active the same constant dynamic force; a certain interchange of these two gives us the phenomena which we associate with the idea of life. It is this action that we recognize as the action of Life-Energy and that which so energizes itself is the Life-Force. Mind-energy, life-energy, material-energy are different dynamism of one World-Force."<sup>30</sup>

It is this force that continues to stay in a so called dead body, although its familiar operations of movement, breathing, eating have permanently ended. There are many cases when a body clinically declared dead has been revived, how does it happen? If we suppose that there is a distinct entity called life which goes out of the dead body, then how can it ever come back to



the body, since there is nothing apparently connecting it to the body? In cases of catalepsy, the mental will is conscious although the body is dead outwardly. Similarly, in certain cases of trance, the mental and physical functions are completely suspended to be resumed again within a certain period of time. But the main point for us at present is that the Force, whatever it be, that maintains dynamic energy of life in the body, has indeed suspended its outer operations, but still informs the organized substance. A point comes, however, at which it is no longer possible to restore the suspended activities, and this occurs when either such a lesion has been inflicted on the body as makes it useless or incapable of the habitual functioning or, in the absence of such lesion, when the process of disintegration has begun, (science also talks about decomposition as the sign of death of a body) that is to say, when the Force that should renew the life-action becomes entirely inert to the pressure of the environing forces with whose mass of stimulation it was wont to keep up a constant interchange. "Even then there is Life in the body," argues Sri Aurobindo, "but a Life that is busy only with the process of disintegrating the formed substance that it may escape in its elements and constitute with them new forms. The will in the universal force that held the form together now withdraws from constitution and supports instead a process of dispersion. Not till then is there the real death of the body."<sup>31</sup>

Having solved the problem of the distinction between life and death, more

in the light of Sri Aurobindo's metaphysics than scientifically, we can now take up the loose end of our argument. What are the observations of science regarding the factors for the onset of aging and death. Having already enumerated the physical and psychological factors let us now see some other factors.

## THANTAPHOBIA

### a) Fear of Death: The Main Obstacle

If death is metaphysically a natural process of life and biologically the absence of internal harmony and coordination and a progressive loss of adaptability and plasticity leading to the inevitable phenomenon of decomposition and death, then, one may ask oneself, why the fear of death in every mortal being? Sri Aurobindo asks this question in his poem "The Fear of Death":

*"Death wanders through our lives  
at will, sweet Death  
Is busy with each intake of our  
breath.  
Why do you fear her? Lo, her  
laughing face  
All rosy with the light of jocund  
grace!  
A kind and lovely maiden culling  
flowers  
In a sweet garden fresh with vernal  
showers,  
This is the thing you fear, young  
portress bright  
Who opens to our soul the worlds  
of light.*



*Death is but changing of our robes  
to wait  
In wedding garments at the eternal's  
gate.*"<sup>32</sup>

So, what is undesirable and terrible to our mortal mentality regarding death is the devouring of life - 'the flowerless stalk drops dull', the compulsion, the pain, the struggle, 'the opening portal's horrid jar,'. The fear of death is the greatest obstacle in the conquest of death. One who fears death is already conquered by death. "The repulsion of the death of the body which is so strong and vehement an instinct of the vital man ... Thrown away it must be and entirely. The fear of death and the aversion to bodily cessation are the stigma left by his animal origin on the human being."<sup>33</sup>

Rosenberg presents this case of thanatophobia in a logical manner and arrives at the conclusion drawn by Sri Aurobindo: "What does not make sense, however, is the proposal that one's death, considered as an historical event is something to be, for example, feared or dreaded. For such attitudes are logically appropriate only to historical events which one could, in principle, live through - and one's own death is necessarily not such an historical event. One's own death, viewed as an historical occurrence, while it is indeed an event which someone else could experience, is not, in point of logic, an event which one can oneself experience, nor even, as we have just seen, an event which one can oneself experience, nor even ... an event

which one can imagine one's experiencing. Those attitudinal responses and emotional reactions which are logically appropriate to experienceable events, therefore - fear and dread and terror, and, for that matter, eager and joyful anticipation - are not logically coherent, first person attitudes toward the historical event of one's own death ... When it is asserted, then, that thanatophobia or 'fear of death' is a natural, universal and unavoidable human emotion, perhaps what is meant is that all persons have a natural and inevitable dread not of the event of death, but of the process which culminates in that event, of the process of dying."<sup>34</sup>

#### **b) How to Overcome the Fear of Death**

What are the methods of overcoming thanatophobia? Four ways could be suggested: the intellectual, the emotional, the psychic and the yogic. The intellectual method is of convincing oneself mentally that death is something that happens to everyone and therefore it will one day or the other come to oneself also. So, there is no reason why one should be afraid of it. Secondly, one must know that death comes to a person only at the appointed hour and not a minute before or later. In a circumstance of massive deaths, someone who is not meant for dying will not die and, vice-versa, there could hardly be any external reason and someone dies because his or her time has come. Therefore fear has no sense and one must accept what is perfectly inevitable and natural.



The second method, that of the psychic, is a more difficult process, but one of greater results. It is to have a psychic contact which in itself brings in the sense of immortality. The discarding of the body loses all its stigma, pain and importance. One knows that the psychic being which has put on this cloak of body has finished its experience in this body and now it is time for it to change for another one just as we change our dress. There's no attachment or regret at the time of death.

"The third approach is for those who have implicit faith in the Divine. It is for a person who is neither a purely mental nor emotionally oriented to a degree that he can escape into his psychic being, but, is capable of great faith. Men of faith always cling to the Feet of the Lord; they in some mystic way identify themselves with the Divine and feel strongly that it is the Lord who does everything for them. They might not have realized the Divine, yet their faith in the Divine is so intense and sincere and unshakable that they easily overcome all fear."<sup>35</sup>

The fourth, the yogic one is meant only for a mighty yogi, a great spiritual warrior whom nothing frightens. He accepts that death is an inevitable thing, but, it is more an accident that has been occurring till now and that it should one day be conquered. One has to fight a terrible battle of constant collective suggestions that have been coming since aeons, earthly habits that have sunk to the level of body cells, everything that has been established in man's mind and life and body. It is fighting against every

feeling, sensation, attraction, reflexes, thoughts that have been imposed upon the body - it is a battle every second of one's life.

It is a spiritual and an occult truth that one attracts to oneself what one is afraid of. If one is afraid of an illness, it could be the surest means of attracting it to oneself. It is almost like calling one's enemy and telling, "Here am I, You wanted to kill me, kill me now!" This being the truth of fear then there is no hope of conquering death if one fears it. That is why it is said by the ancients that complete abhayam or fearlessness is immortality. It is often a practical method as did the Egyptians to face squarely and it disappears. The Egyptians used to lay the neophyte in a sarcophagus and leave him in there for a few days, of course taking care of his food etc., and by the time he came out of the sarcophagus the young disciple would be cured of all fear of death, precisely because he has gone through it.

## CONQUEST OF DEATH

### a) Supermind as the Solution

If death is a universal inevitable fact of existence, if fear is a universal thing and if to conquer the fear of death is the greatest obstacle in the conquest of death and if only mighty yogis can do so, or even attempt to do so, then, is not all this endeavor at physical immortality a vain attempt, a sheer act of folly?

"That seems a madness", replies the Mother explaining the view of Sri



Aurobindo. 'But all new things have appeared as madness until they became realities. The hour is come for this madness to be realized...

"Why has the body the need to sit down as soon as it has made a progress? It is weary and asks 'wait, give me a rest'. That takes it towards death. If it had within itself this ardor to do always better, to be always more clear, more beautiful, more luminous, externally young, one could escape this gruesome process of Nature....

"That is the problem which is now set before us. With the addition, the new help of the supramental force which is now at work, why should not one take up the tremendous game of making it more beautiful, more harmonious, more true - in a word, more divine?

"It is sufficient if there are some brains powerful enough to receive this force (the supramental force) and formulate the necessary action for its realization. Consciousnesses are needed powerful enough to convince Nature that there are other means than hers."<sup>36</sup>

"It is to infuse into matter (body) sufficient consciousness so that its rhythm of growth falls in line with that of subtler parts of the being and... it becomes plastic enough to follow the inner progress, and death would no longer be a necessity. Death is at present a fact for certain reasons... if these are changed, death is not inevitable any longer",<sup>37</sup> affirms Sri Aurobindo.

## **b) Immortality of Body calls - A Biological Truth**

What Sri Aurobindo proposes is not something impossible to realize, for Nature in fact has left enough clues which could make us optimistic regarding physical immortality. "We can resolutely affirm that", writes S. Metalnikov, "in the actual terrestrial conditions of life, the immortality of the cell is an indubitable fact. And what characterizes most living organisms is its potential immortality and not its death."

The doctrine of the immortality of protozoan or the unicellular organism first enunciated by Ehrengerg and Weismann, has been proved by Woodruff and his pupils to be a well-attested biological fact. Further, Metalnikov and Caladjief, have arrived at a conclusion that a protozoan or a unicellular organism knows no process of dissolution that can be compared to the phenomenon that is commonly known as death. They have established beyond doubt that protozoa, when placed in normally favorable environments, retain indefinitely, through their successive binary fission, the vital faculty of self-multiplication ad infinitum, without ever showing any sign of fatigue or degeneracy. This is also true even when these cells are not given to any rejuvenating process like 'conjugation', or 'endomixis', conditions previously held by Maupas, Calkins and others as absolutely essential for any continuation.

Thus, unicellular organisms like the amoebae possess a kind of potential



immortality and are exempt from the nemesis of natural death. Professor Mariano Fiallos-Gil says that the protozoan we are viewing through our microscope today has had no dead ancestors; it is the direct descendant of the original of its kind.

Amongst the sexually differentiated multicellular organisms, there are two different types of cells: germ cells, carriers of the continuity of the line of the species, and somatic cells, cells constituting the body and its tissues.

According to Professor R. Pearl the germ cells are indeed equally immortal. He reasons it out that the fertilized ovum (united germ cells) produces a soma and more germ cells. The soma eventually dies but some of the germ cells prior to the event produce somata and germ cells. So there is a continuous cycle which has never yet ended since the appearance of multicellular organism on the earth.

So, biologically, we are already immortal in our cells and it is only a lack of harmony between the aggregate of specialized cells which bring in senescence and death of a body. So, if these 'reasons' are changed, 'death is not inevitable any longer'. Hence Sri Aurobindo's vision and the biological evidences seem to reaffirm and confirm each other's stand and belief. Immortality of the physical is the goal of Nature and the intention of the evolutionary nîsus.

In the past many an attempt has been made to rejuvenate the body or to

acquire a prolongation of life through siddhis. Certain schools of Hathayoga have attempted dehasiddhi through conquest of time. The Raseswara sect attempted to attain a rasamayî tanu, a body with diving essence. The Mahayani Tantrics achieved skandasiddhi while Nathayogis like Goraksha Jalandharanath tried kayasiddhi. The Vaishnavites aimed at a bhavadeha. Whatever has been the success of these siddhis, 'there can be no immortality of the body without supramentalisation, the potentiality is there in the yogic force and the yogis can live for 200 or 300 years or more, but there can be no real principle of it without the supramental',<sup>38</sup> affirms Sri Aurobindo.

In another context, Sri Aurobindo writes to a disciple: "The change of consciousness is the necessary thing and without it there can be no physical siddhi. But the fullness of the supramental change is not possible, if the body remains as it is, a slave of death, disease, decay, pain, unconsciousness and all the other results of the ignorance. If these are to remain the descent of the supramental is hardly necessary - for a change of consciousness which would bring mental-spiritual union with the Divine, the Overmind is sufficient, even the Higher Mind is sufficient. The supramental descent is necessary for a dynamic action of the Truth in mind, vital and body. This would imply as a final result the disappearance of the unconsciousness of the body; it would no longer be subject to decay and disease. That would mean that it would not be subject to the ordinary processes by which death



comes. If a change of body had to be made, it would have to be by the will of the inhabitant. This (not an obligation to live 3000 years, for that too would be a bondage) would be the essence of physical immortality.<sup>39</sup>

From this short letter of Sri Aurobindo, some cardinal points of his concept of physical transformation become evident. They are: (1) Sri Aurobindo does not want a release from the embodied existence or an indefinite prolongation of life, but aims at a change of earthly life and existence, at a full divine manifestation in the Mind, Life and Body of man and a divine fulfillment of life here upon earth. This object is, as evident, not an individual realization but a gain for the earth-consciousness in general. (2) Some hints regarding the nature of the supramental body - a body not subject to disease and decay and death. (3) Transformation of the body is possible only by a descent of the Supramental Power, which the Vedic Rishis called as *Rta-cit*. It is the full Truth-Consciousness of the Divine Nature, which, when it overtly intervenes in the field of body and Matter, will not be an influence giving the body abnormal or exceptional capacities but which will be an entrance and penetration changing it wholly into a supramentalised physical.

### c) Transformation of the Body

“ This cannot happen without a veritable transformation, and a transformation of the mind and life and the very body is indeed the change to which our evolution is secretly moving

and without this transformation the entire fullness of a divine life on earth cannot emerge. In this transformation the body itself can become an agent and a partner... A fully conscious body might even discover and work out the right material method and process of a material transformation.”<sup>40</sup>

Ultimately, as Sri Aurobindo envisions, this integral transformation “ would mean an approach into what might be called a truth-consciousness self-existent in which the being would be aware of its own realities and would have the inherent power to manifest them in a Time-creation in which all would be Truth following out its own unerring steps and combining its own harmonies; every thought and will and feeling and act would be spontaneously right, inspired or intuitive moving by the light of Truth and therefore perfect.”<sup>41</sup> This state of being of the individual is what Sri Aurobindo calls the divine life.

It is not difficult to imagine and to believe that in such a state of the consciousness when “ the Mind would become a seeing of the light of Truth, Will a force and power of the Truth, Life a progressive fulfillment of the Truth ” the body will transcend all its limitations of disease and death, drugging and deterioration, hunger and need, sex and sensuality. It would “ acquire a fullness of capacity, of totality, of fitness for all uses which the Inhabitant would demand of it far beyond anything now possible. Even it would become a revealing vessel of a supreme beauty and bliss, - casting the beauty of the light of the Spirit suffusing and radiating from it



as a lamp reflects and diffuses the luminosity of its indwelling flame, carrying in itself the beatitude of the Spirit, its joy of the seeing mind, its joy

of life and spiritual happiness, the joy of Matter released into a spiritual consciousness and thrilled with a constant ecstasy.”<sup>42</sup>

---

### END NOTES

1. Sri Aurobindo, *Sri Aurobindo Birth Centenary Library (SABCL)*, Vol. 5 (Pondicherry, India : Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1972), p. 54.
2. Sri Aurobindo, *SABCL*, Vol. 18, p. 177.
3. Ibid., p. 187.
4. Ibid., p. 189.
5. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Vol. III, p. 606.
6. Ibid.
7. Sri Aurobindo, *SABCL*, Vol. 29, p. 600.
8. Sri Aurobindo, *SABCL*, Vol. 19, p. 742.
9. Sri Aurobindo, *SABCL*, Vol. 18, p. 192.
10. Ibid., p. 193.
11. Ibid., p. 192.
12. Ibid., p. 214.
13. Ibid., p. 193.
14. Ibid.
15. The Mother, *Collected Works of The Mother*, Vol. 3 (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Trust, 1977), p. 37.



16. Sri Aurobindo, SABCL, Vol. 29, p. 647.
17. Sri Aurobindo, SABCL, Vol. 12, p. 111.
18. *Bulletin of Sri Aurobindo International Center of Education* (Vol. XV, No. 3), pp. 45-47.
19. Quoted by S. Metalnikov in his book, *Immortalite et Rajeunissement dans la Biologie Moderne*.
20. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Vol. XIX, p. 171B.
21. Sri Aurobindo, SABCL, Vol. 19, p. 200.
22. S. Metalnikov op.cit.
23. Ibid. 16
24. Jay F. Rosenberg, *Thinking Clearly about Death* (N.T.Prentice- Hall, 1983), p. 32.
25. Ibid., p. 33.
26. Ibid.
27. Sri Aurobindo, SABCL, Vol. 18, p. 176.
28. Jay F. Rosenberg, op.cit.
29. Jugal Kishore Mukherjee, *The Destiny of the Body* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo International Center of Education, 1975), p. 392.
30. Sri Aurobindo, SABCL, Vol.18, p. 180.
31. Ibid., p. 181.
32. Sri Aurobindo, SABCL, Vol. 5, p. 54.
33. Sri Aurobindo, SABCL, Vol. 20, p. 334.



34. Jay F. Rosenberg, op.cit., p. 197.
35. V. Madhusudan Reddy, *Yoga of the Rishis*, (Hyderabad: Institute of Human Study, 1985), p. 132.
36. *Bulletin of Sri Aurobindo International Center of Education*,  
Vol. IX, No. 2, p.85.
37. Sri Aurobindo, SABCL, Vol. 24, p. 1230.
38. Ibid., p. 1231.
39. Ibid.
40. Ibid.
41. Ibid.
42. Ibid.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Ananda Reddy has done his doctoral thesis in the philosophy of Sri Aurobindo from the University of Madras, India. He has written a number of articles which have been published in leading philosophical journals of India and abroad. He has toured extensively giving seminars on Sri Aurobindo and Indian Philosophy in countries such as England, France, Singapore. At present he is working at Assumption University, in the Department of Philosophy.