



Swami Venkatesananda  
**When Death is at Hand**

Swami Venkatesananda  
(1921 – 1982)

Swami Venkatesananda was a disciple of the renowned saint H.H. Swami Sivananda who founded the Divine Life Society in Rishikesh, India.

After sitting at the master's feet for seventeen years, serving him and imbibing his teachings, Swamiji left the ashram to share the knowledge he had gained with the rest of the world.

As Swami Sivananda referred to him as 'crest jewel of my mission', Swamiji was the perfect luminary reflecting all that the master stood for.

Although Swamiji gave brilliant lectures throughout the world, he referred to himself only as a disciple of Swami Sivananda. However, because of the light he shed wherever he went, Swamiji became the Guru to many disciples all over the world.

talk given at Satsang  
five days before  
Swamiji took Mahasamadhi

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Pariksit, the disciple in the Bhagavatam, was condemned to death with seven days' notice. He had been cursed: "You will die in seven days." But he took it as a blessing, for in his case, seven days of life had been guaranteed - which is not true in our case. Therefore, he approached a master, and asked a simple question, "What must one do when one realises that what is called death is at hand?"

We cannot be afraid to die. We cannot be afraid of the inevitable. No one is afraid to go to sleep; no one is afraid that the sun will rise; no one is afraid that the sun will set. When we know that the sun will set, we take the proper steps and precautions. In the ashram, as sunset approached, we cleaned the lamps and filled them with oil, making sure there was no blockage. We cannot be frightened that the sun will set - the sun will set, we know it.

We cannot push a fact away. We can not ignore it, or sweep it under the carpet.

And therefore, the question was very wisely asked, "Faced with this certainty, what does one do?" And the entire Bhagavatam was given in response to this.

When I was a child, people were made ready for death. They were constantly told, "The space vehicle from heaven is coming to welcome you and take you away." They were prepared, and therefore did not shy away from the final moment. They were made to contemplate God, bringing about an inner state of being, which would enable them to drop the body in that state. But it was not always possible. There were those who were terribly attached to family, and thinking of them at the last moment. There were those who were terribly attached to wealth, and died clinging to a bunch of keys. It is not so easy.

The master in the Bhagavatam declares, "Live in such a way that your last thought will be of God." But, how does one ensure that one's last thought is of God, the ultimate truth or reality? Or, to put it in a negative formulation, how does one ensure that the last thought is not some kind of unholy thought - the same type of thought that has haunted us throughout our lives?

We have all experienced this: when our thought is one of attachment, there is a problem, sooner or later. When our thought is one of dislike, there is a problem. The person whom we dislike, we are afraid of, it is a problem. Do we know any thoughts other than these? Either we have fond memories, or horrible memories. We remember the things that we are attached to, or that we hate or fear. These three thoughts do not lead to peace or happiness, but inevitably to frustration and sorrow.

How does one ensure that the last thought is not also of the same kind? It is not easy, unless one trains oneself throughout one's life to so organise the mind and heart that the simple truth concerning life is easily seen. Then it is possible that, even at the last moment, the mind will be in an elevated condition.

Why such importance to the last thought? Because, what happens to us after this event called death depends upon the nature of our being or consciousness at the time of death. The state of one's being at that point determines what happens next, whether you call it the next incarnation, heaven, hell - it does not matter. But whatever happens next is dependent upon the last thought-form.

How to ensure that the last thought is not also of the same recurrent type is the problem, and a very serious problem.

There is a hint in the Yoga Vasistha that this famous theory of reincarnation is perhaps much simpler than we understand. The story is neither frightening nor consoling, but its truth may be very simple.

A holy couple had ten sons. They were living very happily together, and the sons were deeply devoted to the parents. But, as is inevitable, the parents dropped their bodies. The boys cremated the bodies, then suddenly it hit them! "We can no longer depend upon our parents. They are gone. What must we do?" They conferred: "Shall we start a business? Shall we become doctors or lawyers? What should we do? Only one thing is certain: we must find a job from which we cannot be easily fired. Should we be emperors of the world? But emperors are always frightened - either of their enemies or of the press. No good. What about the king of heaven? He is also frightened, frightened of the demons. The good people are afraid of the bad people and the bad people are afraid of the good people, of the police. Fear seems to be universal, and even invades heaven. Then, what to do? There is no sense in becoming a demi-god - they are all dismissed sooner or later." The eldest boy said, "How about becoming the creator? If all of us become the creators of the world, then we are safe at least as long as the creation lasts." But, "How does one become a creator?" is the next question.

Nothing is impossible for a meditator. As you think, so you become, and if you think deeply and persistently enough, everything must materialise. You have only to meditate, "I am the creator, my head is the heavens, my feet are the earth, my skin is space ..." And until you become the creator, you must not open your eyes.

Now, imagine these ten boys, with absolute steel will, meditating with closed eyes - they dare not open their eyes for fear of finding out that it has not happened. Meditating ... for how long? They never opened their eyes! And in the meantime, their bodies disintegrated. Here we must contemplate very carefully. Here is someone like me, meditating, "I am the creator of the world." In the meantime, there is a heart attack, and the whole thing stops - the brain stops, the heart stops, the breathing stops, the body stops. And, either the body is taken away and cremated or eaten by vultures. But what happened to that chap who sat there meditating, "I am the creator"? He did not die. Did you cremate him? No. You couldn't even find him! You only found a body and cremated it. But what happened to that being who sat there

meditating, "I am the creator"? He is there. He is there as the creation of the creator. He is there. Where? You have no idea.

It is very much like your dream. Does the dream happen in your bed, so that after you have got up and gone away, someone can lift up the sheet and look for the dream? It is a mystery.

If this is even vaguely clear, you have understood what reincarnation may mean. And then the last thought becomes very important and relevant, as it will probably determine the sort of world you will be in. You may shrug this off callously, saying, 'Ah, it is only going to be a dream.' But please remember that while you are dreaming, that dream is the reality. Therefore, it is terribly important. It is your real world, the world in which consciousness wakes up after the body has been disconnected. That is your real world, and you cannot escape it.

There is a lovely little example that fits in this context most appropriately. Forty or fifty years ago, we did not have these funny little instamatic cameras. In those days, cameras were big, and the photographer used to hide himself under a black cloth and do all sorts of things. Now, supposing you are sitting there, smiling, you hope that the portrait will be first class. But, just as the photographer is about to take off the lens cap, a fly sits on your nose. What will the picture be like? You can't blame the photographer, you can't blame the camera, you can't blame anything for that funny look on your face. That was the look on your face when the plate was exposed.

What I am saying may be overly simplistic, because it is not even clear when exactly the last minute is. I may enter into a coma just now. Is that the last moment? Or is the mind still active in its own field? When the body finally ceases to function, is that the last moment? And with modern medical technology, this problem is getting more and more confusing. Such being the importance of the last thought, the author of the Bhagavatam says:

"Be careful. Live in such a way that this last thought, or the state of your being at the last moment, would be such that you would either go forward or be liberated."

Sri Krishna underlines this a little more clearly in the Bhagavad Gita:

Tasmāt sarveṣu kalesu māmanuṣmāra yudhya ca Mayyarpitamano  
buddhirmame vaiśyaśya saṁsayam. (VIII - 7)

"Therefore, at all times, remember Me only, and fight. With mind and intellect fixed or absorbed in Me, thou shalt doubtless come to Me alone."

Parikṣit had seven days' Notice. You and I might not have that. We may live for another seventy-five years, but still not know when the last hour is. So, what is our fate? How to live? We are here, with death riding our shoulders.

Should we not try to discover the truth concerning life, and how to remain close to that truth?

Tasmat sarvesu kalesu mamananusmara yudhya ca.

Think of God constantly while doing what you have to do.

That was Swami Sivananda's teaching, and it is Satsang that enables us to live in that spirit. We have no choice but to resort to such company, to be in such environment, and to engage ourselves in such activities as would ensure that the mind is almost constantly on a sublime level. This is the only remedy. There is no other.

Therefore, regular satsang is insisted upon. There we are constantly reminded that, however long we live, one of these days we will have to go. And what the state of our being is at that time is entirely dependent upon what we do with ourselves day in and day out while we are still alive and active.

There is a very beautiful and inspiring verse which I heard from Swami Ranganathananda. I heard it just once, and it stuck:

Mahata punya panyena kritoyam kaya naustvaya Param dukkhodadher gantum, tara yavan no bhidyate.

The body is likened to a boat and the holy author says, "You have secured this body-boat at a very great expense in past merit, you have gained this human body which is like a boat for crossing this ocean of sorrow called 'samsara'. In order to cross this ocean of samsara, you have bought this boat called the body. Therefore, make haste to get across before this boat springs a leak. Afterwards it will be difficult."

As Swami Sivananda used to say, "When you are aged and cannot see, what scriptures are you going to read? When you cannot sit for even a few minutes, what meditation are you going to practise?"

Therefore, do all this while the body is still energetic and can take you across.

Once you are on the other side, it does not matter what the body does, what the mind does. You are free.