



Conquest of Death

by Swami Vishnu-devananda

To know the nature of death and immortality you must first answer the question, “Who am I?”

“I am the president, I am the chairman, I am male, I am female, I am a Hindu, I am a Christian, I’m a Muslim, I’m an Indian, I’m an American, I’m British, I’m German, I’m Italian, I am Catholic, I am Protestant, I’m an Arab, I’m a Jew.” What is common to all these statements? “I” is common. “I” remains silent. “I” doesn’t talk; “I” doesn’t speak; “I” doesn’t change. It is eternal, immortal, and all-pervading, without any change. Krishna in the Bhagavad Gita explains about this “I”:

This Self cannot be cut, burnt, wetted nor dried up. It is eternal, all-pervading, stable, ancient and immovable. [Chap II, verse 24]

However, we identify not with this immortal “I”, but with the transitory qualities associated with the body. This is called mortality.

Look at all of the people who have risen to power thinking, “I am the great... Hitler, Mussolini, Franco, Kennedy...” Look at their lives—one moment their lives were great and powerful, the next they were gone. When you identify with this perishable body, thinking this body is me, this is called the small ego. You can identify with this small ego, this body and all its qualities,

but what happens when you breathe your last?

Whether you are Christian, or Catholic, or Hindu, or Indian, or American, or a millionaire, a king or president, what are you? You are food for germs and worms.

I eat lots of tomatoes. One day soon this heart will stop beating and you will put me under the earth and put a tomato plant over me and the tomato plant will say: “You know, he ate me once upon a time, and now I am going to eat him.” And then beautiful tomatoes will be made out of Swami Vishnu. You will make a beautiful tomato salad out of me. When you eat that tomato salad, what are you eating? Swami Vishnu. This is mortality.

You think all that you see is permanent, that it is real, but it is not real because everything constantly changes. The body comes from the food chain and it must go back to the food chain. You forget this. The moment you identify with the world you see, you become afraid of death. Subconsciously and consciously you know that this body cannot remain the same. If you have beauty, you will lose it; if you have strength, you will lose it. Not too long ago I could twist my body this way and that. Now I can do very little. But this change does not happen all at once. It is a gradual process which never stops. Even while sleeping, we are changing. And even now as I talk, the process continues. My grey hair did not come all at once. It appeared gradually.

Our eyes cannot tell us whether the process of change is operating. You can’t even see the change when you put one of the hairs under the microscope. So how do you know? Because you have seen young men become old men. In another ten years, I will be back here and I will be an old man. But we think it only happens to other people. “Oh Swami Vishnu, you’ll be like that, but not me!” This is what is called *maya*. Maya means we forget Reality, and accept this changing world as reality. It doesn’t matter how much medicine you take, how many vitamins, how many pills, or what exercise or pranayama you do; still this body changes every moment. Even this microphone stand is changing. Just as a candle burns down, so also this piece of iron is disintegrating into rust.

Nothing in this universe—this planet earth, the sun, the moon, the stars and the galaxies—remains for even one moment in the same state.

Now, my next question is what is a moment? How big is it? How small is it? How many billionths of a second is it? Scientists can measure one millionth of a second now, maybe more. Can you measure the present moment? No you cannot, because that moment, the present moment, is the interval between the future and the past. As the future comes into the present, it slips into the past before you can measure it. The present can never be caught. Once it has gone into the past it is lost forever. It will not return to the present. When the future comes into the present, it is no longer future or present. It is past.

Tomorrow you can write down, “Tomorrow I will do my asanas.” Every morning when you get up, you will see, “Tomorrow I will do my asanas.” The past, present and future only exist in your mind, in your imagination. There is no such thing as time. Yet we live in the experience called time, space and causation. You think, “Tomorrow will come. I will make millions of dollars. I will marry and settle with children and grand-children. I will enjoy my life.” Though you think tomorrow will come, there is no tomorrow.

You think you will marry, have children, grand-children, be Prime Minister or President. But still you are unaware that the process of change is operating at every moment. You get up in the morning and see one grey hair, you pull it out, and then ten more appear in its place. Then you put on dye. But no matter how much dye you apply, the hair goes grey. You fool yourself by covering up the evidence. The body has come from the food chain; it must go back to the food chain. That’s called mortality.

When we identify with, “I am a German, I am a Hindu, I am a Swami, I am big, I am small;” we forget the

one “I,” the pure consciousness. This pure consciousness, I Am, is not something you can understand in the way you understand this metal microphone stand; or this glass; or this water and its taste. That kind of knowledge is experienced through the senses, mind and intellect. Pure consciousness, *I Am*, is not this type of knowledge. So how do you get the awareness of the *I Am*?

When I look in the mirror, I see the grey hair. I know when I am sick, or strong, or happy, I can feel it. All this I observe. Who is the person who is observing? “I” is observing? Even “I” is an object of the observer. I know I have cataract; I am watching; I can see. So there is an observer and observed, a subject and an object. The subject is the observer; and the object is the observed. When I get knowledge through the senses, for example I drink, the tongue tastes and I know it is sweet. There is a knower, knowledge and known. The subject—“I” is the knower; it observes your senses. It is also the observer of your mind, observer of your intellect, observer of your emotions. You say, “I love somebody” and even then the “I” observes that “I love”. There is an underlying reality behind these changing phenomena which remains constant—the unchanging “I”. It is the substratum of all being.

A simple analogy of the relative reality of the phenomenal world can be seen in the example of the movie. Is a movie moving or is it stationary? It is stationary. You know it is stationary when you take the roll of film and look at it. It is just a roll of film made up of individual frames. When you look at the individual frames, nothing happens. But when you play the reel on a projector the individual frames, projected onto the screen, appear to come to life. They *appear*; but this is not reality. It appears that the screen comes to life even though the screen has no qualities, it remains as a white screen.

You laugh and scream reacting to the

flickering light and shadow. But you forget the substratum on which all this takes place, the screen. That white screen is your *Atman*, the Self, the “I”, pure consciousness, the immortal Self. It is also called Siva or Krishna or Vishnu or Rama or any name you may want to give God. There is but one God, one Brahman, the substratum, on which maya, the light and shadow, plays.

Let me tell you a story about a movie called, “The Exorcist.” My late uncle was an exorcist. People came from far and wide for his help and I used to watch how real exorcisms were done. So when I heard there was a film on exorcism I wanted to see how it would be portrayed. I went to see the film with a few of my students, one of whom was from Hollywood. Despite the fact that she said she was scared, she still wanted to see the film. I asked her whether she had ever seen an exorcism. She said she had seen one in the Hollywood studios, when she had gone on a tour around the studios. In these studios they create make-belief. You can see Fifth Avenue in New York inside the studio exactly as you see it in New York City—an exact replica. Someone from New York will exclaim: “Oh my God, we are on Fifth Avenue!” Then when you open one of the doors you see nothing but a few bamboo poles holding the street up! So I reminded the student there was no reality in the movie. The movie makers cannot catch a spirit and then exorcise it. In fact here we now have a double illusion. They use illusion to make the film; and then the projection makes it a double illusion. I explained all this to her and intellectually she understood it completely. She repeated: “it is all illusion.” But within a few minutes of the movie starting she was screaming! She closed her eyes and repeated, “It is all illusion, all illusion, all illusion.” Yet still she screamed. Why? Intellectually she

understood everything. And yet still she screamed in spite of her education and knowledge of Hollywood. I also watched the film but did not scream. The difference between her and me was that she had forgotten the Self and identified with the illusion, whereas I was just observing it. The girl in the film was vomiting something; that must be green pea soup. The bed was rocking; that must be water. I observed how they created the illusion and did not become part of it. I was aware of myself; I never for a moment forgot that it was unreal. But she forgot herself and started identifying with the illusion, and became part of the drama.

The same thing also takes place in this universal drama we call life. You walk along the street; you see so many people—young, old, male, female; you look and walk on. Then suddenly, you see one girl! You start repeating the mantra: “I love you honey; I love you honey;” you think “if you don’t marry me, I am going to kill myself.” You have forgotten the reality, just as when you watch a movie. You think the girl is everything; without her there can be no happiness. She asks you, “How much money do you have.” You reply, “a million dollars.” “Then I love you too,” she answers. Just as you see the beauty in her, she sees the power and money in you. She thinks, “If I marry him, everything will be beautiful. I can have breakfast in bed and a maid to bring breakfast with no need to work.” And the illusion grows from there. Your mind becomes the projector, the actor, and the enjoyer—in fact the mind projects life just as in a dream.

Let’s take a simple example. Who plays in a dream? In a dream the mind creates an illusion of a tiger in your bedroom and you start to run. The mind is the producer, the writer, the

director, the actor and the observer. There is no difference between a dream and this world. You are caught in maya, an illusion. Maya projects—this is beautiful, this is wonderful, this is painful, this is mine, and this is yours. She goes on projecting constantly changing the scenes each and every moment. Today you sacrifice everything for your wife; the next day you want to sacrifice her!! This is maya.

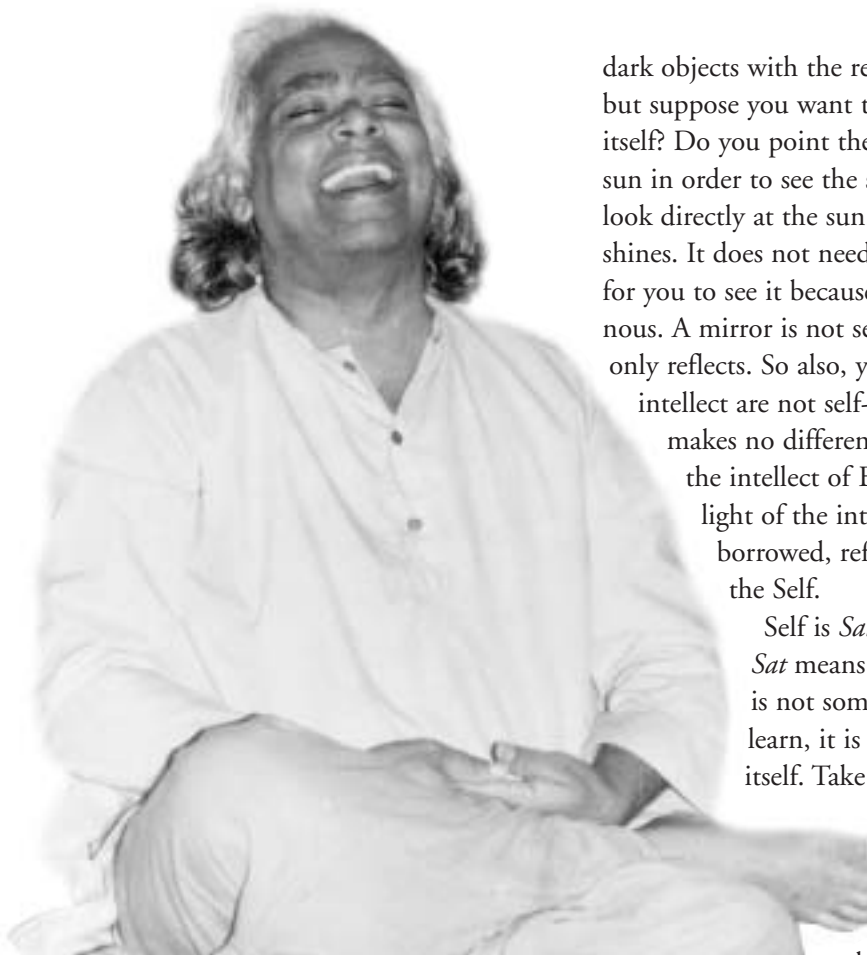
Just as in the movie, you forget the reality, the *I Am*, the eternal, immortal, unchanging Self. This is why you suffer. You identify only with the changing phenomena.

Cosmic mind and individual mind are simply maya. Just as in the movie, you forget the reality, the *I Am*, the eternal, immortal, unchanging Self. This is why you suffer. You identify only with the changing phenomena. But paradoxically you don’t even see the change and you think you are immortal. You think if you dye your grey hair you won’t grow old and die. You constantly fool yourself to follow your imaginary world drama like a movie. Then eventually at the last moment you are hooked onto all the life-sustaining systems—intravenous feed, oxygen mask, heart monitor and the waves slowly get flatter and flatter, the heart muscles weaken and you look at your wife and children. They look at you. You want to talk. She was a good wife. You can’t open your mouth. You have to leave your house, your money, your children and grandchildren. No one is going to come with you. You will go alone. They’re all looking at you. Though tears fall from their eyes, still, you can take no one and nothing with you.

Wife, children, home, money, diamonds, position, power change every day and you will all be cut loose from them at the moment of death. No one, no thing is going to follow you. This is why we fear death. There is only death for you because you think that the body is permanent and that all the material things you have are real. You have forgotten the Self and cannot accept that all things will change and disappear. You are afraid. This is called mortality. And what is immortality? I am not this body; I am not the individual ego or the mind. I am Brahman. That Supreme Brahman I am. The moment you identify with Brahman, the immortal Self, neither male nor female, neither big nor small, neither saint nor sinner, the one Self that shines equally in all of us, then you know immortality.

Even intellectually knowing will give you tremendous strength at the time of suffering because in the physical world we still have to pass through this maya, this illusion. Even swamis have to pass through it!! Last year, I was in the Himalayas in our cave suffering from frostbite. I was taken to hospital and lay there wracked with pain. There was deep suffering. But it was only temporary, a passing phenomenon like a cloud. Today it rains, and then there is no rain the next day. Clouds and rain are passing phenomenon; they are not the Self. But I am Shivoam. I am the Brahman—Shivoam, Shivoam; Soham, Soham. This is immortality. You cannot learn this or understand it intellectually; you will have to realize it. Only after tasting honey can you realize that honey is sweet.

Actually there’s no physical difference between mortality and immortality. It is only a question of identification; the one identifies with the movie on the screen while the other is an observer, aware of the changing nature of the observed objects. If you identify with the immortal Self, there’s neither death



dark objects with the reflected light, but suppose you want to see the sun itself? Do you point the mirror at the sun in order to see the sun?! No, you look directly at the sun. The sun shines. It does not need light in order for you to see it because it is self-luminous. A mirror is not self-luminous, it only reflects. So also, your mind and intellect are not self-luminous. It makes no difference if you have the intellect of Einstein; still the light of the intellect is only a borrowed, reflected light of the Self.

Self is *Satchidananda*. *Sat* means knowledge. *Sat* is not something you learn, it is knowledge itself. Take fire for instance. Fire means there must be heat. If you take the heat out of

fire, there can be no fire. The heat and the fire are the same. Heat is not something the fire has to borrow or glean from outside. The same principle applies to the Self. Atman is not something you learn; it is knowledge. Its nature is knowledge. That knowledge is reflected through your mind, and intellect, the mirror. Of course some mirrors reflect better and brighter. Some mirrors are dull, they reflect very little. Some mirrors are concave or convex, crooked or distorted! Similarly, according to the nature and the level of evolution of your mind, you can reflect the Self within you. When you mistakenly identify with the reflection—"I am intelligent, I am great, I am small, etc." the knowledge of the Self is lost. But the Self exists in its own glory. The sun exists in its own glory without anything to illumine it. This is called consciousness—*chit*. Self is also bliss—*ananda*. The nature of the Self is ananda. When there is heat there is also light. So when we talk of fire we know both light and

heat are there. In the same way the Self's inherent quality is ananda, bliss or happiness. This is why we search for happiness. No one wants pain. But we do not know where to find happiness. We mistake real happiness for its reflection through the senses, and their objects; through consuming this and that. We find no lasting satisfaction from sensual happiness based on temporary finite objects. No matter where you look for happiness in this material universe, you find no happiness. You can ask for anything you want, any amount of money, wife, beauty, strength, or health. Yet you never say, now I don't need any more, I am satisfied. You always feel something is missing because you are looking in the wrong place for the wrong thing. The object that is missing is your Self. There is no use to search for the Self in the outside world.

Let me tell you a little story. Once upon a time a poor woman in India lost her sewing needle in her tiny cottage and she searched outside the cottage for it. Needles are very costly in India. A passing neighbor saw her searching and asked her what she was doing. "I have lost my needle," replied the woman. The neighbor enquired where she had last seen it. "In my cottage," replied the sad lady. The neighbor asked why then was she looking for it outside and not inside. "My friend, there is no light in my cottage, so I'm searching outside where there is light," came the answer. We are like the old lady. Happiness is within. The *I Am* is that happiness. But you think it is somewhere in Las Vegas, in Delhi, in some restaurant, or with some person. So you go searching; but you will never find it until you search within and find out who you are. Then you will find satisfaction. Once you know that you are Satchidananda, that there is no change for the Self, then there is nothing to fear. Fear of death disappears. You are Satchidananda. There is no death and birth for you. ॐ

nor birth, no suffering; the pain of the changing world becomes like a passing cloud. You are unaffected by it. It is so very simple. Yet in daily life, you forget. You identify with this 'movie' of day-to-day life and then become caught in the drama of worldly life.

That *I Am* consciousness cannot be known by any method that the rational mind knows. To know objects you need intellect, mind and senses. But the Self is not an object, so how can you know it? Even the eye, the senses, need to borrow light. If you want to see a dark corner you take a mirror and reflect the sun's light into it. Now the corner is bright. If you look into the mirror at this point the mirror will blind your eyes. You see the sun coming from the mirror. Suppose you are stupid and the mirror is egoistic. The mirror says "I am luminous. I am bright. I can illumine you. Look at my power." If you are also stupid, you believe it. "Ah yes," you say, "look at its power, it blinds my eyes." You can see