YOGA AND THE FEAR OF DEATH

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In a recent study Garfield (1975) found that psychedelic drug users, Zen meditators, and practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism expressed more accepting attitudes toward death than did graduate students in both psychology and religion; also, that Zen and Tibetan Buddhists were more accepting than the drug users. Garfield suggested that states of altered awareness, achieved through the use of drugs or meditation, produced experiences which involve ego-dissolution and thus resemble death, and that these experiences might make death more 'knowable', acceptable, and ultimately transcendable.

Although Garfield's meditation sample was limited to Zen and Tibetan Buddhists, his findings are relevant to the theory and practice of yoga. According to the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali (Taimni, 1967), the fear of death is one of the five major afflictions or obstacles to self-realization. From a purely technical perspective, yoga may be considered a body of discipline designed to control the fluctuations of the mind. The aim of this process is to permit the Self or Seer to reside in its original nature. When the fluctuations of the mind are not controlled, the Self is said to become identified with or entangled in experience. This condition of entanglement is termed 'ignorance', the primary of the five afflictions, and it is considered the root of the remaining four afflictions which are conceived as emanating from the root ignorance in a generated sequence: egoism, attachment, aversion, and the fear of death. The method by which the afflictions are to be attenuated is prati-prasava, inverse propagation or reabsorption into the root cause (Taimni, 1967).

If the afflictions are viewed as propagating 'outward' from the root cause, ignorance, and if their removal requires an inverse
propagation, then the starting point for the attenuation of the afflictions is the fear of death. According to this interpretation, yoga teaches that one of the first purposes of meditation is attenuation of the death fear. It is only by facing this elemental fear that the yogi can achieve the attenuation of the other afflictions and ultimately overcome ignorance.

The yoga position regarding the fear of death is consistent, if not identical, with Ernest Becker's (1973) analysis of the basic human dilemma. According to Becker, the terror of personal annihilation is at the core of human character and culture. He views society as an elaborate structure designed to achieve a "defiant creation of meaning," a vehicle for achieving a communal sense of heroism. He regards the essence of the hero as one who dies and is then reborn. Heroism thus means victory over death, a demonstration that death is not real or final. Becker regards the human need for heroism as a central theme in human life, an attempt to defend against the basic fact of creaturely finitude.

Necessarily... everything that man does in his symbolic world is an attempt to deny and overcome his grotesque fate. He literally drives himself into a blind obliviousness with social games, psychological tricks, personal preoccupations so far removed from the reality of his situation that they are forms of madness-agreed madness, shared madness, disguised and dignified madness, but madness all the same. "Character-traits... are secret psychoses" (p.27).

Becker thus views almost all human effort as a massive attempt to deny rather than face the fact of personal death. Thus, a critical element in the day-to-day workings of the death-denying madness, according to Becker, is the phenomenon of transference. Through various forms of transference the human being seeks salvation.

This is how we can understand the essence of transference: as a taming of terror... Beyond ourselves we sense chaos. We can't really do much about this unbelievable power, except for one thing: we can endow certain persons with it. ... Mirabile! The transference object, being endowed with the transcendent powers of the universe, now has in himself the power to control, order, and combat them... The transference object comes to represent for the individual "the great biological forces of nature, to which the ego binds itself emotionally and which then form the essence of the human and his fate" (p. 145).

According to Becker, transference can assume a form of fetish control (in the sense of an object assumed to have magical powers) in which the person perceives the environment in such
transference as fetish control

a way as to banish anxiety from it. In this view, the seeking of salvation through personal identification with heroes, saviors, saints, and super-therapists, as well as some institutions and cultural systems, is a form of fetishism. In such cases there is an attempt to achieve control, magical control, over the circumstances of existence, life and death. The rub, as Becker sees it, is that these attempts result in a falsification of reality.

To deny death through some form of experience, some 'happening' can also be a fetishization. In the author's experience with students of yoga, it appears as a craving to experience actual visions of divine persons or other realities. Similarly, students captivated by the possibilities suggested in Castaneda's works (e.g., 1971) appear particularly prone to this kind of thing. Their reactions are reminiscent of the kind of 'experience collecting' which seemed to prevail among the drug cults of the 1960s. This may serve to explain why in Garfield's study (1975) the psychedelic drug users revealed more death anxiety than the Zen and Tibetan Buddhists. They may have tended more toward a fetishization of their experiences.

Another form of fetishization of experience is one often found among practitioners of yoga who seek to enter and remain in some kind of repressive trance. These individuals fail to appreciate that techniques such as pratyahara (withdrawal of the senses) and the various samadhis are not goals, but are only tools used to realize the true nature of self-tools which can be put away when they have done their jobs. The practitioner who prefers trance to direct confrontation with the afflictions is like a carpenter who continually polishes his tools, but never builds with them. A more sophisticated form of experience-fetishization is found in the desire to experience ego-dissolution and thus be freed of its attendant anxieties. One wants to be shown that ego really is illusion and that enlightenment is not.

These considerations are in no way meant to suggest that transcendent experiences are bunk. On the contrary, it is their reality that produces the problem. The dilemma for the seeker lies in hankering after or clinging to these experiences. This seeking and clinging is a form of the very entanglement with experience that constitutes ignorance and keeps the ego in business. Insofar as it represents fetishization it is a manifestation of unresolved death fear. Yoga, according to Patanjali, demands that this fear be faced squarely for what it is—annihilation of the individual personality. From the yogic point of view the hero (or 'warrior' in the sense of Castaneda's Don Juan) does not die looking forward to rebirth. Looking for-
ward to rebirth is a form of clinging to life. The hero faces death with non-attachment—"the same non-attachment with which he faces all experience. This attitude is well known in Zen. According to Wienpahl (1964):

We do not worry about satori or getting it, whatever it may be. If you suddenly see a thing as you have not seen it before, a little more clearly perhaps, or if you suddenly feel contact with a person, ... (we) call these experiences by-products of the process. But we do not aim for them. We do not aim for them. And you may progress without them (p. 40).

The fact that progress can be made without such experiences is important. It relieves one of the sticky bind of seeking by not seeking. Van de Wetering's account (1975) of the passage of his first koan under an American Zen master is instructive in this regard. Although he apparently shed some tears upon learning that he had passed his koan, the actual moment of passing was uneventful.

And now the moment had come and I left the master's rooms with tears in my eyes, but as soon as I started walking back to the Zenda my brain began to work... I had heard solving a koan is accompanied by satori, enlightenment. ... I had always thought that satori would somehow be connected with light, everything would suddenly be very clear.

I had not, however, noticed any light. The experience hadn't been spatial either. I had imagined that satori might mean "entering the fourth dimension". But everything around me was three-dimensional. My hearing hadn't improved either. So, what had happened? I had to admit that nothing had changed very much (p. 55).

In Zen there is talk of the "awful smell of enlightenment" (Kapleau, 1965). This 'smell' refers to the tendency of those who have 'experienced' something to make a big deal out of it. Perhaps van de Wetering's "nothing had changed very much" is closer to the mark of enlightenment than if he had experienced something cosmic. Perhaps 'glimpses of truth' do not turn into recognizable 'experiences' until we begin to make something of them. Perhaps the very process of becoming aware that something has happened is itself symptomatic of re-entanglement of the Seer with the Seen. According to yoga, such experiences should be given up. Ignorance is entanglement with all experience, even 'peak' experiences.

The relationship which the meditator has with experience is thus a curious one. Deikman (1976) has indicated that we must learn to accept experiences, to become receptive to them. In-
Letting go, as Garfield (1975) suggests, the opening up to certain kinds of experience may lead to an attenuation of the death fear affliction. On the other hand yoga reminds us to beware of all attachment.

My own teacher was a tantric and used to speak of the ’practice of immortality.’ By ’practice’ he meant continuous work on one’s self in lived situations—opening to life without seeking anything special. In formal meditation this was practiced as the skill of letting-go, not just of maladaptive, physical tensions, but also of those little ‘clingings’ and ‘cringings’ that collectively constitute the afflictions. In active daily life it meant being prepared to accept relationships and all their attendant responsibilities, to take life as it is. The receptive and active forms of letting-go were to be regarded as continuous from the start, not something to be achieved later through some higher, saving state of consciousness. By ’immortality’ he did not mean transcendence of death, but that one must discover one’s duty in life and then complete it. When duty was finished, one would be ready to depart. Death, an old friend, would come easily.

REFERENCES