

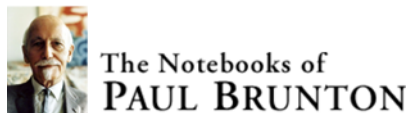
At the time of death...

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In this article, we have compiled several notes from “The Notebooks of Paul Brunton” in which the author refers to death, what actually occurs at the moment we leave the physical body, and the subsequent processes we undergo once we are outside the material world. The “loss” of loved ones, the need to understand the true meaning of death, and our return to this earthly world in successive lives are topics that PB addresses with complete naturalness and explains with great lucidity, offering us an authentic view of this inescapable fact of our existence.

Below are PB's valuable reflections on the event of dying: the process of passing into another sphere of consciousness.

The finite life of human beings

Life-in-Itself is infinite and unchanging, but there 'is' an end to the kind of experience undergone by the living entity in its finite human phase.

Just as sound goes back into silence but may emerge again at some later time, so this little self goes back into the greater being from which it too may emerge again at another time.

We worry ourselves through the days of an existence which is itself but a day. A profound sadness falls on the heart when it realizes the transient nature of all worldly things and all human being.

It would be a curious state of affairs if the sole purpose of life were to be death, a cessation of all interest in all the activities included under the heading "human existence." Has the divine intelligence nothing better to offer us?

If decay and disintegration were not present at some stage, if our life spans were extended to say double their present length, then the old would outnumber all other sections of society. Stasis would overwhelm culture because the bodily slowdown would reflect itself mentally. The World-Mind had a better idea.

Even stars must die one day, more violently and dramatically than most human beings, for even they come under the law that whatever had a beginning must also have an ending.

It is not so much because death deprives man of his possessions and relations that he dreads it, as the possibility that it deprives him of his consciousness—that is, his self, his ego.

With death, consciousness takes on a new condition but does not pass into mere emptiness, is not crumbled away with the fleshly brain into dust. No! It survives because it is the real being of a man.

Those who deplore, lament, or wail at the inevitability of death are viewing it in a very narrow, short-sighted way. The more mature ought to be thankful that we humans are not condemned to remain forever confined to a single body: this would indeed become a source of anxiety, if not of hopelessness.

The more they enjoy the world the more they suffer when they leave it—unless they have learnt to put detachment behind the enjoyment.

No force can be destroyed; it can only be rechannelled. Life is a force; death is its rechanneling.

Electrical fields have been detected by the use of newly developed micro-volt-meters around all living things, but there was no field around a dead man. Many years ago in the 'The Quest of the Overself' the existence of an electromagnetic connection between the photograph of a man and the man himself was revealed, and its disappearance on his death was also recorded. Thus science begins to offer a basis for a part of our original statement.

We are tenants in this rented house of the body. We have no certainty of possession. There is no lease on parchment paper with a government stamp to guarantee even a single year's holding.

Individuated life is forever doomed to die whereas the ALL which receives the dying can itself never die.

The voyage of a man's life always ends in the port of death. Let him not forget this when tempted by fortune into undue elation or tossed by misfortune into undue misery.

This dismal fact is the mark on all things, and creatures: that they pass away, have a transient existence, and in this absolute sense lack reality. They appear for a while, seem substantial and eventful, but are in truth prolonged mirages. If this were all the story it would be melancholy enough. But it is not. 'That' whence they came, to which they go back, does 'not' pass away. That is the real, that is the consciousness which gave the universe, of which 'we' are a part, its existence. Out of that stems this little flower in each life which is the best, highest self. If we search for it and discover it, we recover our origin, return to our source, and 'as such' do not pass away. Yes, the forms are lost in the end but the being within them is not.

Ordinarily, the date and even the place where one is to die is preordained.

It is better to pass out of the physical body in possession of consciousness rather than in a state of drugged anesthesia.

This applies more particularly to spiritual aspirants. But where there is great pain, local anesthesia may be unobjectionable.

Dying into annihilation is one thing but dying into another form of consciousness is quite different. It is the latter which happens at the passing away of the life-force from the body.

There are the visible living people and the invisible living ones. None are ever lost to existence or destroyed in consciousness, but only their bodies.

This lesson, that a man is not his body, will be learnt in modern times through his reasoning intelligence as it was learnt in former times through his believing feelings.

So materialistic has the religious understanding of many men become, that they will only accept as the highest—if not the only—proof of life after death, the appeal to their gross senses and not to their fine intuition or rational intelligence. That is to say, the bodily form of a dead person has to materialize in front of their own or someone else's eyes to convince them that he has not perished after all.

Only in those last few days or hours or minutes do most men find out the truth that as one kind of life leaves both them and their flesh, another opens up to them.

If the thought of death horrifies so many people, the thought of the void—of the utter annihilation of ego, of the abandonment of everything and of the cessation of suffering, frustration, and anxiety which belong to life in the world—is a welcome idea for those who think more deeply. But since life is only partly suffering, since there are also joys and satisfactions in it and positive values which ought not to suffer destruction, a better balanced view is provided by philosophy and that is that consciousness, real consciousness, cannot die, but only returns to its ultimate source.

The same destiny which brought us to birth will bring us to death. And just as a drama of different phases of consciousness unfolded itself after birth, so a drama of changes in consciousness will unfold itself after death. It is not annihilation that we ought to fear, for that will not happen, but rather the evil in our own self, and the pain that follows in the train of that evil as a shadow follows a man in the sunlight.

Death is the great revealer

The act of dying has no suffocating feeling connected with it other than during the momentary swoon. On the contrary, it is genuinely a liberating process.

Death is the great revealer. In that vivid but dreamlike experience which follows it, each man is shown what he has 'really' done with his earth-life, what he 'should' have done with it, and what he failed to do with it.

It is paradoxical that the moment of his death should automatically bring to life again all of a man's past. He has to repeat it all over again, this time from a different point of view, for the selfish, coloured, and distorting operation of the ego is absent. Now he sees it from an impersonal and uncoloured point of view. In other words, he sees the real facts for what they truly are, which means that he sees himself for what he really is. His brief experience over, he then begins to live like a man in a dream. His own will is not responsible for what happens to him as a dreamer and it is just the same with what happens to him as a spirit. He does not personally and consciously choose, decide, and predetermine the course of his spirit life any more than his dream life. It flows on by its own spontaneous accord here as there. This is more vividly brought home to him, if he is an evil man, when the after-death experience turns into a nightmare.

In the case of violent or accidental death, there will be a period of unconscious deep sleep for an ordinarily good person, but of being consciously earthbound for an evil one.

It would be wrong to say that the pictorial review of life experience when dying is merely a mental transference from oneself ... to those persons with whom one has been in contact during the life just passed, as the pictures unveil before him. What really happens is a transference from the false ego to the true Self, from the personal to the impersonal. It is a realization of the true meaning of each episode of the life from a higher point of view.

All possessions are left behind when a man makes his exit from this world. Every physical belonging, however prized, and even every human association, however beloved, are taken abruptly from him by death. This is the universal and eternal law which was, is, and ever shall be. There is no way to cheat or defeat it. Nevertheless there are some persons who, in a single particular only, escape this total severance. Those are the ones who sought and found, during their earthly life, the inspiration of a dead master or the association with a living one. His mental picture will vividly arise in their last moments on earth, to guide them safely into the first phase of post-mortem existence, to explain and reassure them about the unfamiliar new conditions.

Human life is only a brief episode in the immensely larger span of his cosmic cycle

We ought to be glad that we do not live forever. It is a frightening thought. If there were no death we would go on and on and on, captives in the body, having tried all experiences which promised much but in the end yielded nothing. No, it is good that in the end we are released from the physical tomb, as Plato called it, and will be able to enjoy a period of dignified rest until we plunge back again into the next re-embodiment.

What man undergoes in his physical life seems so real, so lasting, and so intimate—yet it is only a brief episode in the immensely larger span of his cosmic cycle.

Since death is the certain future of all men, being an unalterable feature of the World-Idea, and since life would be intolerable if they were not given such pauses to recuperate from its demands, and lastly since there is nothing they can do to avoid it, they might as well discard the negative but common way of looking at it.

The sadness of a withered flower, its head wilted, its stem shrivelled, its leaves dry corpses, is a sober reminder of beauty's fragility and our own fatal destination.

The pillage of time can be avoided by no one. It takes his years, and in the end his life.

Why talk only of rebirth? Do we not experience death just as often?

The end of life, as of journeys, is contained in its beginning.

The confrontation with death is not a pleasant prospect for anyone who is not in a condition of extreme suffering of some kind, emotional or physical. The thought of being parted from everything and everyone seems hideous. And yet, in the event itself, there may happen a beautiful, smooth passing-out.

So long as man listens to his little ego alone, and lets the voice of the Overself remain unheard and unknown, so long will all his cunning and his caution avail him little in the end when the body has to be left and the mind must return to its own proper sphere.

The ordinary human attitude towards death pushes its very thought as far from oneself as possible, prefers not to consider it; the unpleasantness and distress, possibly the pain, which too often accompany the crossing-over are too unwelcome, if not unbearable.

The inner work of philosophy results in liberation from the fear of death—whether the death which comes naturally through old age or that which comes violently through war.

Nobody has to teach us to hold on to life and to be repelled by the thought of our death. Why?

A time comes when the prudent person, feeling intuitively or knowing medically that he has entered the last months or years of his life, ought to prepare himself for death. Clearly an increasing withdrawal from worldly life is called for. Its activities, desires, attachments, and pleasures must give way more and more to repentance, worship, prayer, asceticism, and spiritual recollection. It is time to come home.

Life is a preparation for death

Life is a preparation for death, just as death is a preparation for re-entry into life.

As the soul prepares or begins to pass out of the body, one of two things may happen. Depending upon the direction and strength of its attachments or desires, it is pulled away from them into unconsciousness, a kind of sleep. Or it recognizes places and persons connected with it, and if knowledge or experience are present, co-operates with the passing and moves out to a higher plane for a blissful sleep. After a while both must awaken to live again.

The life that is in us goes at death into the life that is in the universe. It is as secure there as it was in us. It is not lost. Thereafter it reappears in another form, another body.

The wheel of life does not stop for long—soon it will turn again and pass from the point of death to the point of life.

The importance of sum up the lessons of a lifetime and prepare ourselves for the next incarnation

If we have all had many many previous lives on earth, we have also had many many previous deaths on earth. The actual experience of dying must leave some residual lesson or meaning or message behind in the subconscious.

We who find ourselves in old age with brittle bones and shrunken flesh, with wrinkled face and greyed hair, may find this a depressing experience. But like every other situation in life there is another way to look at it—perhaps in compensation for what we suffer. And that is to sum up the lessons of a lifetime and prepare ourselves for the next incarnation so that we shall better perform the necessary work on ourselves when that comes.

It is not pleasant to think of the decay which overtakes the faculties of so many persons who live into their seventies or eighties, yet it is a necessary thought for those who are only half that age or less to entertain. It may act as a reminder or even as a spur to quicken their pace upon the Quest.

There is a part of himself which cannot die, cannot pass into annihilation. But it is very deep down. The sage encounters it before bodily death and learns to establish his consciousness therein. The others encounter it during some phase in the after-death state.

Much confusion has been caused, and much atheism generated, by the very limited knowledge and very large ignorance of many expounders of popular religion and spiritualistic cults. They teach that the human being, after a first short appearance on this planet for an insignificant period (for what is seventy years or so against the millions of years which geology proclaims as its history?) will pass into a post-mortem state wherein it will dwell forever, that is, for all eternity. That the little ego with all its attributes and qualities, will keep the personal identity and the personal existence of that brief appearance on earth unchanged, congealed into permanency, outliving the earth itself, reunited with family and friends, finding itself among primitive people of the Iron Age and among the cave-dwellers, is a ridiculous notion. It is so utterly unscientific an idea, so appallingly opposed to real religion, as to be ludicrous.

The multitude are brought up to be pleased with the prospect of living (after death) in eternity (as egos). But a remnant who have pondered long and deeply on what this really means shudder at the same prospect.

The eternity which we are supposed to enter after death, one where a particular form and ego are supposed to be preserved forever, is absurd. But there is a true eternity where form and ego, time and space, are transcended.

Life between incarnations

Life between incarnations consists of a dream-like state followed by a period resembling deep sleep. There is, however, no remembrance of one's former birth upon emerging from this state.

The difference between life as we ordinarily know it and as it appears between incarnations is that here we have an apparent mixture of two worlds, the mental and the phenomenal, whereas there only the former exists.

We pass through the dream and deep sleep states after death just as we do before it.

The sense of time between incarnations varies. Five minutes to one is a hundred years to another.

With the understanding of life in the body comes the knowledge of what life is without the body, that is, death. Both are existences in Mind, which is their reality.

When the decreed time comes the body is discarded but the mind remains. It passes through varied experiences and finally sleeps them off. After a while it awakes deeply refreshed. Then the old propensities slowly revive and it returns to this world, putting on a new body in new surroundings.

I am sorry to say that the theosophy of latter days has over-emphasized the value of individuality in contrast to the theosophy of Blavatsky, who knew the truth. Let me tell you that the so-called astral plane is equivalent to the dreamworld and nothing more. Hence the after-death state is just like a very vivid dream, after all. Therefore in the true esoteric school we do not pay much attention to such matters but concern ourselves with life here and now, on this earth, with which we have to deal whether we like it or not.

This dream-like progress after death is not valueless. It acts as a reminder during each pre-birth of the true purpose of life.

If you kill a man, the Law of Consequences (Karma) compels you to carry that man's corpse with you wherever you go. At first you do it in memory pictures that create fear of punishment, but after death you will 'see' the victim and 'hear' his cries all over again.

At the moment of death...

How trifling all his earthly successes must seem to a dying man! It is both the irony and tragedy of life that we use up its strictly limited quota of years in pursuits which we come later to see as worthless and in desires which we find bring pain with their fulfilment. The dying man, who sees the cinema-film of his past flash in review before his mental eyes, discovers this irony and feels this tragedy.

Whole scenes out of the years from childhood to the present unwind themselves during the post-death experience before the spirit's mental gaze.

Drowning persons who were saved and survived have told of the feeling of time slipping backward and their whole lifetime being replayed. This is an experience which is not theirs alone; it happens to all who pass through the portal of death.

The death of loved ones

The student has learned that the death of the body is extrinsic to the consciousness, which lives on unchanged in itself. But when death claims the body of someone he loves, his faith will be put to test. At such a time, he must remember that the loved one has actually evolved to a more highly developed phase of life.

The passing away of a loved one is a heavy blow—one for which most people are improperly prepared, because they are not yet willing to face the inescapable fact that all life is stamped with transiency and loss and sorrow. Only by seeking refuge in the immortality of the Overself and in discovering the truth and wisdom of the Divine Purpose, can we also learn how to endure the suffering on the ever-changing face of life. "Letting go" is the hardest of all lessons to learn; yet it is the most necessary for spiritual advancement.

The passing of a loved one is usually a major experience, and one's reaction to it shows the degree of development attained. He must remember that sometimes it is best for a loved one to pass away if in doing so he or she is rid of a serious and painful bodily disease. He must also be happy in the thought that the loved one has now gone on to a sphere of existence where happiness, bliss, comfort, and rest can be found as can only be imagined but not found here. He may be assured that the loved one is really in a better world where only the beautiful side of life can penetrate and where ugly and base things can never find lodgement. He may help best at such a moment by an occasional loving remembrance during the peak point of meditation. For the sensitive aspirant, such an experience as seeing death face to face as it were, is always a great one. It should mark the beginning of a new period, of a more vivid evaluation of the transient character of earthly life, and result in a powerful aspiration to wrest something of an enduring character from the comparatively few years spent on this space-time level.

He who has had the good fortune to have a loving companion in marriage should not rail at Destiny when this helpmate is taken away. The same karma which brought the two together has also severed the relationship. But this is only temporary. There is really no loss, as mind speaks to mind in silent moments. Love and companionship of high quality will act as an attractive force to bring them together again somewhere, sometime. Many feel this in the inner understanding.

When death is properly understood

When death is properly understood, and the immateriality of being is deeply felt, there will be no more mourning funerals. If the deceased has had a long and full incarnation, his passing will be accepted philosophically. The bereaved person faces the problem of adjusting himself to a new cycle of the outer life. During the transitional period, he may feel lonely and uncertain of the future. At such a time, the inner meaning of both this period and the coming cycle should be sought.

To someone who believes that life continues beyond the body's death, a funeral seems a useless affair. But it compels the mourners to remember and think of, for a few hours, what they ordinarily forget—that they too must go, that all personal matters come to an abrupt end, and that the person himself must part from every one of his possessions. Such a ritual, otherwise boring and tedious, is a salutary reminder.

Cremation is a definite and emphatic challenge. If one really believes that the soul of man is his real self, or even if one believes that the thinking power of man is his real self, then there can be no objection to it, but, on the contrary, complete approval of it. The method of burying dead bodies is fit only for one who believes that this thinking power is a product of the body's brain, that is, for a materialist.

The honour that is shown to a corpse by attempting to prolong its form is misplaced. It is a glaring contradiction to accept the credo of survival and then give to dead flesh what should be given to living soul. A rational funeral would be a completely private one. A rational funeral service would be one held to memorialize the memory of the deceased,

and held not in the presence but in the absence of the corpse. A rational disposal would be cremation, not burial. The psychic and spiritual health of a community demands the abolition of graveyards.

When suffering reaches its zenith or frustration is drawn out too long, when the heart is resigned to hopelessness or the mind to apathy, people often say that they do not wish to live any more and that they await the coming of death. They think only of the body's death, however. This will not solve their problem, for the same situation—under another guise—will repeat itself in a later birth. The only real solution is to seek out the inner reality of their longing for death. They want it because they believe it will separate them from their problems and disappointments. But these are 'the ego's burdens'. Therefore the radical separation from them is achievable only by separating permanently from the ego itself. Peace will then come—and come forever.