

DEATH 1.

J. Krishnamurti, *Commentaries On Living Second series*

double-quotation: visitor

THE RIVER WAS very wide here, almost a mile, and very deep; in mid-stream the waters were clear and blue, but towards the banks they were sullied, dirty and sluggish. The sun was setting behind the huge, sprawling city up the river; the smoke and the dust of the town were giving marvellous colours to the setting sun, which were reflected on the wide, dancing waters. It was a lovely evening and every blade of grass, the trees and the chattering birds, were caught in timeless beauty. Nothing was separate, broken up. The noise of a train rattling over the distant bridge was part of this complete stillness. Not far away a fisherman was singing. There were wide, cultivated strips along both banks, and during the day the green, luscious fields were smiling and inviting; but now they were dark, silent and withdrawn. On this side of the river there was a large, uncultivated space where the children of the village flew their kites and romped about in noisy enjoyment, and where the nets of the fishermen were spread out to dry. They had their primitive boats anchored there.

The village was just above, higher up the bank, and generally they had singing, dancing, or some other noisy affair going on up there; but this evening, though they were all out of their huts and sitting about, the villagers were quiet and strangely thoughtful. A group of them were coming down the steep bank, carrying on a bamboo litter a dead body covered with white cloth. They passed by and I followed. Going to the river's edge, they put down the litter almost touching the water. They had brought with them fast-burning wood and heavy logs, and making of these a pyre they laid the body on it, sprinkling it with water from the river and covering it with more wood and hay. A very young man lit the pyre. There were about twenty of us, and we all gathered around. There were no women present, and the men sat on their haunches, wrapped in their

white cloth, completely still. The fire was getting intensely hot, and we had to move back. A charred black leg rose out of the fire and was pushed back with a long stick; it wouldn't stay, and a heavy log was thrown on it. The bright yellow flames were reflected on the dark water, and so were the stars. The slight breeze had died down with the setting of the sun. Except for the crackling of the fire, everything was very still. Death was there, burning. Amidst all those motionless people and the living flames there was in- finite space, a measureless distance, a vast aloneness. It was not something apart, separate and divided from life. The beginning was there and ever the beginning.

Presently the skull was broken and the villagers began to leave. The last one to go must have been a relative; he folded his hands, saluted, and slowly went up the bank. There was very little left now; the towering flames were quiet, and only glowing embers remained. The few bones that did not burn would be thrown into the river tomorrow morning. The immensity of death, the immediacy of it, and how near! With the burning away of that body, one also died. There was complete aloneness and yet not apartness, aloneness but not isolation. Isolation is of the mind but not of death.

Well advanced in age, with quiet manners and dignity, he had clear eyes and a quick smile. It was cold in the room and he was wrapped in a warm shawl. Speaking in English, for he had been educated abroad, he explained that he had retired from governmental work and had plenty of time on his hands. He had studied various religions and philosophies, he said, but had not come this long way to discuss such matters.

The early morning sun was on the river and the waters were sparkling like thousands of jewels. There was a small golden- green bird on the veranda sunning itself, safe and quiet.

"What I have really come for," he continued, "is to ask about or perhaps to discuss the thing that most disturbs me: death. I have read the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, and am familiar with what our own books say on the subject. The Christian and Islamic suggestions concerning death are much too superficial. I have talked to various religious teachers here and abroad, but to me at least all their theories appear to be very unsatisfactory. I have thought a great deal about the subject and have often meditated upon it, but I don't seem to get any further. A friend of mine who heard you recently told me something of what you were saying, so I have come. To me the problem is not only the fear of death, the fear of not being, but also what happens after death. This has been a problem for man throughout the ages, and no one appears to have solved it. What do you say?"

Let us first dispose of the urge to escape from the fact of death through some form of belief, such as reincarnation or resurrection, or through easy rationalization. The mind is so eager to find a reasonable explanation of death, or a satisfying to this problem, that it easily slips into some kind of illusion. Of this, one has to be extremely watchful.

"But isn't that one of our greatest difficulties? We crave for some kind of assurance, especially from those whom we consider to have knowledge or experience in this matter; and when we can't find such an assurance we bring into being, out of despair and hope, our own comforting beliefs and theories. So belief, the most outrageous or the most reasonable, becomes a necessity."

However gratifying an escape may be, it does not in any way bring understanding of the problem. That very flight is the cause of fear. Fear comes in the movement away from the fact, the what is. Belief, however comforting, has in it the seed of fear. One shuts oneself off from the fact of death because one doesn't want to look at it, and beliefs and theories offer an easy way out. So if the mind is to discover the extraordinary significance of death it must discard, easily, without resistance, the craving for some hopeful comfort. This is fairly obvious, don't you think?