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# VEDÂNTA PHILOSOPHY

LECTURE BY

SWÂMI ABHEDÂNANDA

ON

## Does the Soul Exist after Death?

DELIVERED UNDER THE AUSPICES OF THE VEDÂNTA SOCIETY,

AT TUXEDO HALL, NEW YORK, SUNDAY,

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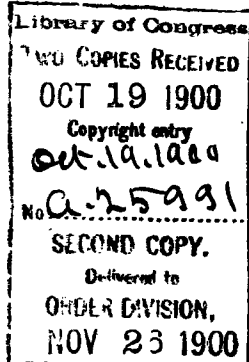
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# THE MOTHERHOOD OF GOD

LECTURE BY

SWÂMI ABHEDANANDA

TUXEDO HALL

NEW YORK, NOVEMBER 12, 1899

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"If the slayer think that he has slain, or if the slain think that he is slain, both of them know not that the soul can neither slay nor be slain."—*Katha Upanishad, ii. 19.*

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## DOES THE SOUL EXIST AFTER DEATH ?

One of the most poetical of the Upanishads, I mean the Katha Upanishad, which has been translated by Sir Edwin Arnold, under the title of "The Secret of Death," begins with this inquiry: "There is this doubt; when a man dies, some say that he is gone forever, that he does not exist, while others hold that he still lives; which of these is true?" Various answers have been given to this question; metaphysics, philosophy, science and religion have tried to solve this problem. At the same time, attempts have also been made to suppress this question and to prevent inquiry as to whether or not man exists after death. Hundreds of thinkers have brought forward all sorts of arguments to do away with questions bearing upon this momentous subject.

From ancient times there have been atheistic and agnostic thinkers in India who denied the existence of the soul after the death of the body. They are known as Chârvâkas. They believe that the body is the soul, and that the soul does not exist outside of the body, and that when the body dies, the soul is also

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dead and gone. They believe in nothing that cannot be perceived by the senses. Their motto is: "As long as you live, do not fail to enjoy. Live comfortably and enjoy the pleasures of life. Do not think of the future. Get all that you need and wish; if you have not got money, then beg or borrow it, for when the body is burned into ashes no one will have to be accountable for your deeds."

Such Chârvâkas we find in almost every country. For instance, in the Old Testament we read, Solomon says: "Go thy way, eat thy bread with joy, and drink thy wine with a merry heart. . . . Live joyfully with the wife—whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might; for there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave, whither thou goest." Eccl. ix. 7, 9, 10. The followers of such thinkers are spreading very rapidly and their number is increasing every day. They are now known as atheists, agnostics, materialists, etc. According to this class of thinkers, those who believe in the existence of the soul as separate from the body, or in a life after death are ignorant and superstitious fools, while those who follow their ideas are clever and intelligent beings. Most of them hold that there is no such thing as soul. No argument can convince them or change their views, because they will not admit the existence of anything which lies beyond the reach of their senses, or which cannot be perceived by the limited powers of the senses. They have written volumes after volumes against the existence of the soul, and have tried to stop such useless questions of the mind; but in spite

of their efforts, have they succeeded in stopping that innate question, "What remains after death?"—which rises spontaneously in almost every human heart? No. The same question rises to-day as it arose thousands of years ago. No one can stop it, because it is inseparably connected with our nature.

The same question was asked by saints and sinners, by prophets and priests, by kings and beggars amongst all nations, in all climes. We are discussing the same question to-day; and it will be discussed in the future. We may forget it for the time being in the turmoil and struggles of our lives; we may not ask it when we are deeply absorbed in comforts, luxuries and sense enjoyments; we may delude ourselves by various false argumentations; but the moment we encounter the sudden appearance of death, the moment we see that some one of our nearest and dearest is breathing his last, we stop for a while and ask within ourselves: What is this? Where has he gone? Does he still exist? What has become of him? That dormant question reappears in a new form and disturbs our peace of mind. Then we begin to inquire; but at the very threshold of our inquiry we find an adamant wall which it is almost impossible to break through. Weak intellects stop there; their feeble attempts to cross that wall produce no result. That wall is nothing but the belief that the body is the producer of the soul, that the soul is the result of the physical form we call the "body." Those who can overcome this strong barrier can understand whether or not the soul exists after death. The old, crude way of inferring the exist-

ence of soul after death and a future life for all men, women and children from the tradition of a single miraculous resurrection of a certain person, no longer appeals to our reason. The days of believing blindly in the authority of any one's sayings are gone by. We are no longer children; we want maturer reason; we want to discuss that question more deeply. Those who believe in that miraculous resurrection will perhaps say that those who do not believe in it have no hope. But we no longer accept their statements. The time has come when we want to discuss the question scientifically, psychologically, philosophically, metaphysically, and in all other possible ways.

Now let us see whether the explanation that body is the cause of the soul is satisfactory or not. Taking it for granted that the soul, or the mass of thought, or whatever you may call it, is the outcome of the combinations of matter which make up the body, we ask, What is the cause of that body? What force combines the matter into the form of the body? What force is there which forms your body in one way and my body in another? What is the cause of those distinctions? The materialistic Chârvâkas will answer that this body was caused by another body of the parents. As the parents produce this body so the body of the parents is the cause of this body.. But that is not the true answer, for instead of explaining the cause of this body and this combination of matter they show us another combination of matter, and the question remains the same. What is the cause of that combination of matter,—the parents' body? They answer, another



combination of matter,—and so on. Instead of answering the question and explaining the cause of the combination of matter they say that this combination is the result of another combination, which ultimately leads to the fallacy of *regressus ad infinitum*. The method of explaining the soul by the body is like the process of explaining the cause by the effect, which is putting the cart before the horse.

Modern physiologists, anatomists, pathologists, and a host of other materialistic and agnostic thinkers, however, hold that body, or the combination of matter, produces thought, intelligence, consciousness, mind or soul. In medical schools and college laboratories students are taught that thought, or intelligence, or consciousness, is nothing but a function of the brain. Moreover, they learn that every special form of thought is a result of the activity of a special portion of the brain. When we see things, or think of seen objects, the optical convolutions of our brain are active. A certain portion of the temporal lobes are active when we hear, and so on.

Those of the modern scientists who advocate the production of thought by brain say that "mind is conterminous with brain functions." If the brain functions stop, the mind, intelligence, consciousness, and all the mental phenomena will instantly stop. The phenomena of consciousness correspond, element for element, to the operations of special parts of the brain. There is no such thing as soul; consequently there can be no question regarding its existence after death. They deny the existence of the soul altogether. The

sensations decay when the organic conditions change and stop when the machinery stops. The brain brings into existence the material of consciousness of which our minds consist. Some explain the process by which thought is produced by the brain, by saying that the peculiar structure of the brain is destined to produce thought and consciousness just as the stomach is destined to perform the function of digestion and the liver to secrete bile. As food materials, after falling into the stomach, change and assume new qualities, so the impressions of the brain through the nerves are metamorphosed into ideas, thought, emotion, will, expressions of the face, speech, disposition, etc. Thus thought or soul is the secretion of the brain; when the brain is gone, soul cannot exist. Here impressions are compared to food as if the impressions were gross forms of matter or as if they could exist apart from a perceiving mind. Buchner, one of the most famous materialists, says: "Thinking must be regarded as a special mode of general natural motion." J. Luys says: "As one sees a metallic rod, placed in a glowing furnace, gradually heat itself and pass successively from the shades of bright red to dark red, to white and develop, as its temperature rises, heat and light,—so the living sensitive cells, in presence of the incitations that solicit them, exalt themselves progressively as to their most interior sensibility."

Mr. Percival Lowell says: "When we have, as we say, an idea, what happens inside of us is probably like this: the neural current of molecular change passes up the nerves, and through the ganglia reaches at last

the cortical cells. . . . When it reaches the cortical cells it finds a set of molecules which are not so accustomed to this special change. The current encounters resistance, and in overcoming this resistance it causes the cells to glow. This white-heating of the cells we call consciousness. Consciousness, in short, is probably nerve-grow." Thus the western materialists who believe that the physical forces are metamorphosed into ideas, thoughts and sensations describe the process by which this change takes place. Mr. Herbert Spencer, being an agnostic, advocates the metamorphosis of the physical forces into states of consciousness but he does not describe the process. He leaves it as a mystery which it is impossible to fathom. That is, he does not know how this metamorphosis takes place, but he is sure it does take place. Mr. Spencer, however, identifies the soul with the brain and compares it to the piano. He says: "Ideas are like the successive chords and cadences brought out, which successively die as the other ones are sounded, and it would be as proper to say that these passing chords and cadences thereafter exist in the piano as it is proper to say that passing ideas thereafter exist in the brain" (soul). . . . Principles of Psychology, VII., p. 485. But here Mr. Spencer forgets that the piano needs a performer to produce musical sounds. Music is never brought out by the piano itself if it does not exist in the mind of the performer. So his analogy is imperfect and incomplete. It would have been complete if he supposed that the individual soul or mind is detached from the

brain and plays upon its nervous centres and brain cells as a performer plays upon the keys of a piano.

Another materialistic thinker, Professor W. K. Clifford, who believes in the combination theory, says: "Consciousness is a complex thing made up of elements, a stream of feelings. The action of the brain is also a complex thing made up of elements, a stream of nerve messages. For every feeling in consciousness there is at the same time a nerve message of the brain. Consciousness is not a simple thing, but complex; it is the combination of feelings into a stream. Inexorable facts connect our consciousness with this body that we know; and that not merely as a whole, but the parts of it are connected severally with parts of our brain action. If there is any similar connection with a spiritual body it only follows that the spiritual body must die at the same time with the natural one." Thus the materialistic thinkers, who do not believe in a soul as separate from the brain, or independent of the physical body, try to deduce mind and intelligence from matter, or from the combinations of matter, either by applying the theory of production, or the theory of combination.

In India similar theories were advanced by the Chârvâkas and the Buddhists, who did not believe in the existence of a soul as separate from the gross body. The Buddhists maintained that the body is the cause of mind and intelligence, that consciousness is the result of the combination of insentient matter and unintelligent forces of physical nature. They used the illustration of a lamp and the light. This body is just

like a lamp, and the intelligence, or consciousness, is like the light produced by the burning of the candle.

But Vedânta philosophers refuted both these materialistic theories by pointing out the fallacy of their principal arguments. Vedânta says that matter or object is only one half of the universe, and the other half is mind, or subject, or soul. It is impossible to deduce the one from the other. In the first place if we analyze our knowledge of matter and force, we find that we cannot know matter by itself and we cannot know force by itself; that what we know is nothing but a mental change. Knowledge of matter is nothing but the knowledge of that change of mind of which we are conscious. When we say that matter exists we are conscious of a peculiar mental change beyond which we cannot know. The mind cannot go beyond itself. Even our knowledge that the soul or mind is a function of the brain presupposes the existence of another mind or knower. Whenever we say that consciousness or soul is the result of the combination of matter, that statement also requires another mind to be conscious of that idea.

John Stuart Mill was right in saying that after dissecting a human brain, when one does not find there any trace of the soul or mind, and denies its existence, or asserts that mind or soul is the function of the brain, he forgets that such knowledge necessarily implies the existence of his mind or soul. As the knowledge of matter, or brain, or any other kind of knowledge depends upon the self-consciousness, it will be absurd to deny the priority of that which is the basis of con-

sciousness, of intelligence, and of all knowledge, and with the help of which one can know the existence of matter, or its combinations. G. J. Romanes says: "We cannot think any of the facts of external nature without presupposing the existence of a mind which thinks them, and therefore, so far at least as we are concerned, mind is necessarily prior to everything else. It is for us the only mode of existence which is real in its own right, and to it, as to a standard, all other modes of existence which may be inferred must be referred. Therefore, if we say that mind is a function of motion, we are only saying, in somewhat confused terminology, that mind is a function of itself. Such, then, I take to be a general refutation of materialism."\* If it be a scientific truth that motion produces nothing but motion, as it has been established by modern science, how can we maintain that the molecular motion of the brain cells produces consciousness, or intelligence, which is not the same as motion, but is a knower of motion? Therefore, Vedânta philosophy teaches that the source of consciousness cannot be found in matter, but stands independent of it. What we call matter is only the medium through which consciousness manifests itself.

Dr. Schiller, an eminent thinker of the West, holding similar opinions, says: "Matter is not that which produces consciousness, but that which limits it, and confines its intensity within certain limits; material organization does not construct consciousness out of arrangements of atoms, but contracts its manifesta-

\* "Mind and Motion and Monism," p. 21.

tion within the sphere which it permits." There are other agnostic thinkers who say: "The conception of a soul as a substantive thing is a mere figment of imagination." Kant said: "There is no means whatever by which we can learn anything respecting the constitution of the soul so far as regards the possibility of its separate existence."

David Hume, like some of the Buddhistic philosophers in India, believed that the human soul is nothing but a bundle of impressions and ideas. Hume said: "When I enter most intimately into what I call myself, I always stumble on some particular perception or other of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. When my perceptions are removed for any time, as by sound sleep, so long I am insensible of myself and may be truly said not to exist. And were all my perceptions removed by death and I could neither think, nor feel, nor see, nor love, nor hate, after the dissolution of my body, I should be entirely annihilated; nor do I conceive what is further requisite to make me a perfect nonentity." So, according to Hume, our souls die every night when we sleep soundly. I think very few of us here present will be ready to accept such an explanation of the nature of the human soul.

Those who depend on sense perceptions only, try to see the soul by dissecting the brain, but when the senses do not reveal it, they deny its existence. They may just as well try to find the soul in the heart or stomach, as the ancient seekers of the soul did. If we examine properly, we shall be able to see logical falla-

cies and inconsistencies in all the materialistic and agnostic arguments which support the theory that soul is the result of body or of the combination of matter, or else that the soul does not exist at all. From ancient times such materialistic conclusions have been repeatedly arrived at by thinkers of different countries. But do our minds remain satisfied with such ideas, and do we stop from asking again and again—is there any life after death? If we hear millions of times “there is no soul,” still we cannot be entirely convinced that we shall cease to exist after death; we cannot think of our annihilation; we cannot believe that our individuality will be lost forever. Such solutions do not appeal to our reason; they do not satisfy our minds, nor do they bring any consolation to our souls. These statements are but the expressions of ignorance of truth. Truth is that which exists eternally. If existence be a truth to-day, it must be true eternally.

If we deny the existence of a soul as independent of the body, we cannot explain many facts which often occur during our lifetime, nor the genuine phenomena described in the reports of the Psychical Research Society of Europe and America. We cannot ignore the facts recorded in the lives of many cultivated sceptics and agnostics who have seen their doubles outside of themselves when alone in their rooms reposing on a couch or an easy chair. There are instances of such doubles talking, walking or doing various other things. How are these facts to be explained? There are many descriptions of the manifestation of the doubles of the Yogis in India. Various attempts have



been made to explain such events by asserting that they are either optical delusions or hallucinations of the brain. But we cannot say they are optical delusions or hallucinations if they can stand the test of verification. There are many properly verified instances of the appearance of the double. Suppose at night before retiring one is sitting alone in his room, after locking the door from inside. Suppose his mind is greatly disturbed with some important business question or a mathematical problem. He suddenly sees another exactly like himself sitting at his desk with a pen in his hand, writing something on a piece of paper; and, after examination, he finds that it is an answer to his question or the correct solution of the problem which has puzzled him for many days, what explanation will you offer? What kind of hallucination is this? What verification stronger and more satisfactory than this do you want to have? Such an occurrence cannot be explained by clairvoyance or telepathy. Some may say it is a false story, but mere assertion does not disprove the facts. The denial of a fact does not change the nature of the fact. Facts are facts whether we admit or deny them, whether our current theory can explain them or not. Clairvoyance, telepathy, and thought transference have failed to explain these cases. Such facts can only be explained by the theory of the existence of the soul as separable from the body. According to science, that theory is true which can explain most facts, and we should accept it until a better theory or a better explanation comes. Those who believe in the theory of produc-

tion, or that of combination, will shut their eyes to such facts. But those who believe in the transmission theory, or, in other words, those who hold that brain or human body is the instrument through which the soul manifests its powers, will find no difficulty in explaining all the genuine phenomena connected with the double.

Prof. William James, of Harvard, says: "The transmission theory also puts itself in touch with a whole class of experiences that are with difficulty explained by the production theory."

Again there are authentic instances of persons appearing to friends immediately after death. There are many such instances in India, in Europe, and in every country. Such instances may occur where the persons appearing to friends ask to have their children taken care of, or bring some message. One need not go to spiritualistic séances to experience these things. Many such experiences have come to persons in private life and in their own homes; and they have been well verified.

In spiritualistic séances, ninety-nine cases out of one hundred of spirit manifestations are mixed with fraud, and many professional mediums have been most pitifully exposed both here and abroad. The motive power in professional mediums is to make money, or to earn a living.

In India the Hindus do not trust a professional medium. On the contrary, they say it is wicked to hold public séances for money. It is more wicked to earn a living at the expense of the poor spirits. Why

try to earn your living by making the poor spirits appear to you? Those persons who do this are considered ordinary *fakirs*. Although many mediums have been exposed, and many spirit manifestations have been proved to be like magic or jugglery, still those fraudulent cases cannot be the reason for denying the existence of the soul as apart from the body or in a life after death. Now, the question may arise: If the soul exists after death, does it retain its individuality? The Vedânta philosophy says, yes, it does. The souls of earthbound spirits retain their personality, too. Some of the western writers, who have known very little of Hindu philosophy, say that the highest ideal of the Hindu religion is the annihilation of the soul. These childish statements prove their ignorance and prejudice. We hear such things from writers who consider themselves great scholars after reading the description of Hindu religion given by the Christian missionaries, who do not see good in any religion except their own, or who write simply to serve their own purposes. In the voluminous writings of the Hindus, however, you will never find a single sentence which teaches that the soul will be destroyed after death. On the contrary, you will read that the soul is eternal, immortal, deathless and birthless. In the Bhagavad Gita it is said: "The soul of man is indestructible; it cannot be pierced by the sword; fire cannot burn it; air cannot dry it; water cannot moisten it."

"If the slayer think that he has slain, or if the slain think that he is slain, both of them know not that the soul can neither slay nor be slain."

Ralph Waldo Emerson, after reading the Bhagavad Gita, rendered this passage in verse in his poem entitled "Brahma":

" If the red slayer think he slays,  
Or if the slain think he is slain,  
They know not well the subtle ways  
I keep, and pass, and turn again."

As regards the retaining of the individuality, Vedānta says that each soul after death takes with it all the experiences, impressions, and ideas which it gained on earth; it takes its mind, its intelligence, its intellect and powers of the senses and enjoys, or reaps, the fruits of its own thoughts and deeds.

If you read the funeral service of the Hindus you will find that after the death of a person the relatives do good deeds in the name of the departed, believing that good thoughts, prayers and good works, done in their names, will help the departed spirits. The Hindus also believe that, if we think of them constantly and invoke them, asking them to remain with us for our own gratification without thought of their good, we force them to remain confined to that particular personality which was connected with their earthly bodies they left behind them. Personality is always connected with the body.

At every birth of the body we have a certain personality according to the environments, and if we keep one soul confined in one personality or one set of environments, then there will be no progress of the soul

on higher planes. Therefore, it is better not to drag our departed friends to our plane of existence; but to help them by sending good thoughts to them.

The most ancient writers of the Vedic ages show that they believed in the spirit world of the *Pitars*, or fathers, where the departed souls go after death. The king, or ruler, of this place is called *Yama*. He was the first of the mortals to enter that world and he became the ruler of those who came later.

The Hindus believe in a heaven, but not in any hell. The Hindu heaven is different from that of the Christian or of the Mohammedan. The Hindus believe that heaven is a realm where the departed souls go to reap the pleasant effects of their good and virtuous actions, that they remain there for some time—that is, until the results of their good works are completely reaped; then after that period, they will return to this world again. The Christians, Mohammedans, and Zoroastrians believe in a heaven of all kinds of sense enjoyments, where pleasures will come incessantly without troubles or any sort of pain. This, according to the Hindus, is not a desirable state. They say that all these celestial enjoyments are phenomenal and transitory. Supposing a spirit remains in heaven and enjoys for a million years or for one cycle; still, compared to eternity, this is a very short time. So they say, that after enjoying the results of good works in those realms, one is bound to be born again, either here or in some other planet, according to one's tendencies and capacities. Therefore, in the Bhagavad Gita it is said: "All the different worlds of spirits,

beginning with the highest heavens, are states from where one must return, because they are within the realm of phenomena and are changeable. But he who attains to the realization of Truth transcends all phenomena and the laws which govern them."

The Persians believed that the soul would rise three days after death and would go either to heaven or to hell, according to its thoughts, speech and works. This Persian idea of heaven was afterwards adopted by the Jews and the Christians. The ancient Hebrews did not trouble themselves about the life after death. They believed that God breathed life into man's nostrils and that the breath, which came from Jehovah, would go back to Him; that the life breath of all creatures would return to the source from whence it came. "That which happens to man also happens to lower animals." This life breath was sometimes called "Nephesh," "Ruach," or "Neshama."

The Egyptians believed in a double which was like a shadow of the body, and which remained as long as the body remained. This gave rise to the idea of mummifying the bodies of the dead. If the body was injured in any part, the double, or soul, was likewise injured; so to keep the soul intact they preserved the bodies.

The Chaldeans believed in a double which would be annihilated if the body were destroyed. They expected a resurrection of the corpse. Many of the Christians have a similar belief. This idea gave rise to the custom of embalming and burying the dead. Some of the Christians still believe that the body will

rise after death. Others do not believe in the resurrection of the body. They believe that the soul will remain and exist through all eternity, although it had a beginning. The Christian idea regarding the beginning of the soul is that at the time of birth, each soul is newly created by the Almighty God. But the Hindus say that that which has a beginning cannot live through all eternity; it must have an end. The Hindus do not believe that the soul is created by God or by any other being. It is eternal by its nature. It is birthless and it cannot die. The Hindus do not mean destruction or annihilation by death; they mean by it a change of body or form. This kind of death is a constant attendant of life. Phenomenal life is impossible without death or change of forms. We are dying every day. Every seventh year the entire body has changed every particle and renewed every atom.

Prof. Huxley says: "Physiology writes over the portals of life, *Debemur morti nos nostraque*, with a profounder meaning than the Roman poet ascribed to the melancholy line. And in whatever guise it takes refuge, whether fungus or oak, worm or man, the living protoplasm not only ultimately dies and is resolved into its mineral and lifeless constituents, but is always dying, and, strange as the paradox may sound, could not live unless it died." Although every particle of the body changes, we still continue to exist; our continuity is not broken. From babyhood to old age we retain the same sense of "I" and of personal identity. This continuity of the conscious agent, or

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VEDANTA PHILOSOPHY.

“I,” cannot be explained by any physical or chemical law. According to Vedānta philosophy, thought, or feeling, or intelligence can never be produced by any mechanical or molecular motion. “Motion produces motion and nothing else,” says modern science. As such, how can the motion of the atoms of the body produce consciousness? That must be due to some higher power, or force. This force is ordinarily called “soul.” The soul is not subject to the atomic or molecular changes in the body; it is rather the cause of them. It is beyond all change, and consequently, beyond death. It is the basis of the continuity of the conscious state and of the sense of identity in the individual. As we survive and retain our individuality after each seven years of change and renewal, so we shall live as individual souls after the final dissolution of the form of our bodies. In the Bhagavad Gita it is said: “As during our lifetime we survive the death of the baby body, the young body, and the mature body, successively, and retain our individuality, so after the death of the old body we shall survive, live, retain our individuality and continue to exist through eternity.”

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