

The Fantasy of Dying

Dr. Vikram Jeet



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Author

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Dedication

To the countless individuals who have grappled with the enigma of death, in their personal lives, in vivid dreams, and through creative expressions and imagination, this work is dedicated to all those who have found solace, empathy, inspiration, or a renewed appreciation for life while confronting the mysteries of mortality.

It is dedicated to the memory of my parents, and also to all those who have passed into eternity, yet whose lives continue to inspire us and resonate in the stories we weave, tell, admire, ponder, and, most importantly, learn from. The salient feature is that we learn to walk in their indelible footprints. Walking in these paths is different, just as we all are different. We do not leave the same mark; we leave a different mark, and in the process we make the previous one a “unique artifact.” Thus, no step goes into oblivion; instead, it creates a mosaic of living ideas, noble thoughts, and diversified cultures.

Their absence and the longing they leave behind remind us of the preciousness of each moment they lived, and also of the enduring power of human connection, the connection that weaves the web of life. Everyone is a small strand in the vast creation, yet these small strands define the web. As Pericles, the great Greek politician, observed, what one leaves behind is not what is engraved on stone monuments, but what is woven into the lives of others.

This book is a testament to the enduring human quest to understand our relationship with the ultimate mystery and to find meaning and purpose amidst the inevitability of our own demise. To the brave souls, like my parents, who faced death with dignity, grace, and a profound understanding of life’s ephemeral beauty, this work is humbly offered. Their courage serves as a beacon, illuminating the path toward a more conscious and compassionate engagement with mortality, for ourselves and for future generations. It is through their experiences, both joyful and sorrowful, that we begin to unravel the complex tapestry of human existence and find strength in the face of what is perhaps our most profound and universal shared experience: **“we are mortals.”**

PREFACE

The human fascination with, or fear of, death is as old as humanity itself. From the mantras, shlokas, and texts of *Shrutis* revealed to ancient sages and recorded in the Vedas, Upanishads, Mahakavyas, Puranas, Darshan Shastras; from rituals performed to appease tribal, ancient, and other gods and passed down from generation to generation; from the earliest cave paintings depicting scenes of life, death, and the afterlife; from written texts on papyrus, clay, or stone tablets; from intellectual discourses in the philosophical treatises of great philosophers, theologians, statesmen, and literary giants; to the scientific analyses of modern times, our species has consistently engaged in a dialogue with mortality.

In the search for immortality, in the light of day or the shade of night, in actions judged right or wrong more often by the mind than by intellect, in the seducing and tempting stupor of worldliness or the sacrament of penance, humanity has repeatedly stumbled upon the inevitability of mortality.

“Analysis of death is not for the sake of becoming fearful, but to appreciate this precious lifetime.” These words of the Dalai Lama answer our often unfounded fear of death and render this deeply engaging topic even more meaningful and fascinating.

The Sutras mention *Abhinivesha*, a Sanskrit word meaning “will to live,” indirectly referring to the fear of death and the clinging to life. Thus, the fear of death is essentially the fear of losing that attachment, the fear of losing that desire itself. All religions and philosophical commentaries state that life is filled with misery if one has not understood the truth.

Abhinivesha is one of the five *Kleshas*, or negative mental states, that cause suffering. It is not merely the fear of death; it also includes the incorrect identification of the true Self with the temporary physical body or the material world. This fear can

prevent a being from attaining *moksha* or *nirvana*. Thus, while the fear of death has existed since ancient times, some Sutras and texts were lucid enough to offer both its rationale and its remedy. It is this fear alone that has led humanity to write mammoth treatises. Yet, despite such vast literature, it can still send a shiver down the spine. How, then, does one overcome it? Through understanding, an understanding that comes through contemplation. As Jiddu Krishnamurti, the great Indian philosopher and religious thinker, observed: “What is needed, rather than running away or controlling or suppressing or any other resistance, is understanding fear, that means watching it, learning about it, coming directly into contact with it. We are to learn about fear, not how to escape from it.”

This book, *The Fantasy of Dying*, seeks to explore the multifaceted nature of this enduring dialogue. It is not a morbid exploration of the gruesome details of death, but rather a thoughtful and nuanced investigation into how we, as humans, construct, interpret, and ultimately use our understanding of death to shape our lives. We will examine cultural variations in beliefs about death and the afterlife, psychological anxieties surrounding mortality, and the romanticization of death in certain aspects of popular culture.

This work also addresses the crucial distinction between healthy contemplation of mortality and the serious issue of suicidal ideation. The book integrates insights from philosophy, psychology, anthropology, and mythology, weaving together historical narratives, scientific findings, and artistic expressions to create a comprehensive tapestry of human engagement with the end of life. We will journey through diverse cultural rituals, explore philosophical debates on the meaning of life, and analyze portrayals of death in literature, art, and modern media. The ultimate aim is not to offer definitive answers, but to encourage a deeper understanding of our complex and often contradictory relationship with death, promoting a balanced perspective that embraces life while acknowledging its inevitable end.

This is a journey into the human heart, into the profound mysteries that have haunted and inspired us since the dawn of consciousness. This is also a historical journey into the time we have left far behind with all the details having some imprints from their relevant texts.

As mentioned earlier, human concern with mortality finds expression in all thought, ideas, philosophy, literature, and religions. Will Durant, the American author and philosopher, went a step further when he said, “Death is the origin of all religions, and perhaps if there had been no death, there would have been no gods.” Without entering into this debate, let us begin with the documented texts available to us, starting with one of the oldest known literary works, the *Epic of Atrahasis* and the *Epic of Gilgamesh* of the Mesopotamian civilization. These texts are centered on the creation of humanity, mortality, and the search for meaning in life in the face of inevitable death.

As these are among the oldest literary works available to date, this book will attempt to take you on a time-machine journey, approximately 5,000 years back, to the Mesopotamian civilization. After traversing major civilizations and religions, it will gradually arrive at contemporary times. You will not travel alone; you will carry with you the infinite plethora of the past, gods, goddesses, ceremonies, rituals, mythologies, texts, folklore, tales, and much more, and witness how they continue to influence and shape us today.

This 5,000-year-old journey, with its dreams, beliefs, rituals, stories, texts, and literature, helps define our present-day existence. The journey is long, spanning different parts of the habitable earth across different eras, yet the common thread that binds us to our past is faith and hope, the acknowledgment of a higher power, the idea that we need something beyond ourselves to give life meaning and purpose. The truths that evolved thereafter are the cumulative results of our forefathers’ blood, toil, sacrifice, and perseverance.

My sincere apologies to those who will travel with me, for I shall take you through the Pre-Vedic, Vedic, and Post-Vedic eras in the final stages of this time-machine journey, aligning them with the scientific temperament of the modern age. This journey is intended to educate and inform; your final understanding and conclusions, however, must remain entirely your own.

Are we ready to enter the time machine?

Our first stop will be the fertile plains of Mesopotamia, where the Sumerians and Babylonians etched their reflections onto fragile clay tablets, myths of creation, great floods, and quests for immortality. From there, we drift along the Nile into the monumental tombs of Egypt, where death was not an end but the beginning of eternal life. We then walk into the bustling agora of Greece, listening as Socrates calmly sips hemlock, and onward into the Stoic schools of Rome, where philosophers trained themselves to contemplate death as a daily discipline.

From the West, our journey shifts eastward. We will stand at the fire temples of ancient Persia, where Zoroastrian priests taught of judgment after death, and then enter the ancestral shrines of China, where death was woven into family duty and harmony with the cosmos. We will move into the forests of India, where sages meditated on liberation, rejecting death not by denying it, but by transcending it through knowledge of the Self. We will also sit by tribal fires where shamans guided souls between worlds, step into medieval churches where salvation was promised through Christ, and pause in mosques where believers prayed for the Day of Judgment.

Finally, our journey carries us into the modern age, into hospitals where machines prolong life, into laboratories where scientists dream of defeating aging, and into digital landscapes where some imagine consciousness uploaded into eternity.

Acknowledgments

I **Dr. Vikramjeet**, express my heartfelt gratitude to my late parents, who always appreciated the ephemeral nature of life and focused on philosophy of Karma to achieve liberation. This philosophy became the core principle of our family. **My sisters, brother** and most importantly my wife **Dr. Ranju Singla** became the epitome of what is life and how to live it.

Sri Muktsar Sahib the land of philanthropists, is my karmbhoomi. The name symbolizing with salvation in our theology, has always inspired me.

My appreciation goes to my fellow friends of **Sri Muktsar Sahib** whom I fondly call as Rhythmians. They always loved my philosophical talks and guided me to write this topic.

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INTRODUCTION

As Haruki Murakami states, *death is not the opposite of life, but a part of it*. Yet “death”, the very word, is forbidden in most of our conversations. This taboo gave me innumerable anxious moments before I could gather the courage to write on this subject. Would writing about it invite a bad omen? Is death a tragedy, a taboo, or an eternal fact? And if it is an eternal fact, why does it appear so ominous? For many of us, the answer would be that it is both. This duality makes our relationship with death deeply paradoxical.

Over generations, humanity has tried, and largely succeeded, to live well. Our generation, in particular, has benefited from material resources that our forefathers lacked. Yet when it comes to dying, does the answer remain the same? Is the disparity between living well and dying well not evident in our thoughts, actions, rituals, sermons, blessings, and societal norms? At times, the fear runs so deep that we are forbidden even to utter the word, lest the god of death hear it. The deity of death is revered only to keep him at a distance. Life is celebrated to its fullest, new birth is a giggle wrapped in sunshine and glitter, while death leaves a bitter taste and is shunned and mourned. This dichotomy is starkly visible.

Is it not possible that we know too little about death because we know too little about life? As Marcus Aurelius, the great Roman emperor and stoic philosopher, said: *It is not death that a man should fear, but never beginning to live*. Even in this modern world shaped by scientific temperament, we remain largely clueless about these questions. Religions, rituals, and customs often explain life as a gift of God and death as His wrath, leading many to seek the impossible dream of immortality through boons from gods and goddesses after severe austerities. This longing arises because humanity has never fully come to terms with the mortal nature of existence.

Death is the ultimate unknown, the horizon that defines the limits of our experience, yet it is also a constant presence, shaping our choices, motivations, and understanding of life itself. For a moment, let us imagine death not as a taboo or catastrophe, but as a paramount aspect of life, labelled as the end of a journey or as transcendence, a far richer speculation. *The Fantasy of Dying* delves into the heart of this paradox, exploring the diverse ways in which humans have grappled with mortality throughout history and across cultures. From ancient myths and rituals to contemporary anxieties and technological advancements, this book uncovers the many facets of our engagement with death.

This work is not intended as a purely academic exercise; it is an invitation to introspection and critical thought. Time counts us out and flesh fades, but death cannot touch the inspiration we leave behind, an inspiration so contagious that it may allow others to feel, “*Out of the mountain of despair, a stone of hope,*” as Martin Luther King Jr. so eloquently stated. Through the lenses of multiple disciplines, philosophy, psychology, anthropology, mythology, and the arts, we will explore the psychological and emotional weight of mortality, cultural variations in death rituals, and the powerful ways death is portrayed and interpreted in artistic media.

The romanticization of death in popular culture will be examined alongside the serious realities of suicidal ideation, emphasizing the importance of a balanced perspective that distinguishes healthy contemplation from harmful fantasy. We will explore how fear of death can both hinder and motivate us, shaping our decision-making and our search for meaning. We will also examine advancements in life-extending technologies and their ethical implications, prompting discussion on the nature of human life and the boundaries of medical intervention. Ultimately, this book aims to foster a nuanced understanding of our complex relationship with mortality, encouraging thoughtful engagement with the subject and cultivating a deeper appreciation for the preciousness of life and the beauty of its

inherent impermanence. This journey is not about overcoming the fear of death alone, but about understanding it as a fundamental aspect of the human condition, one that ultimately enriches our experience of being alive.

Death's Dance Through History

Yes, death dances through history, and every step, every expression tells a distinct story. As Arthur Schopenhauer stated: *Change alone is eternal, perpetual, immortal.*

Our understanding of death, a change as fundamental as life itself, has been an ongoing dance throughout history, and it continues even today. Its steps and expressions are shaped by cultural beliefs, confidence born of faith, traditions followed with pride across generations, scientific advancements, and, most importantly, the ever-evolving human psyche.

From the earliest cave paintings depicting the hunt for sustenance, symbols of death, and portrayals of the afterlife, to later *Shrutis* and written texts, philosophical treatises, religious discourses, and debates, and finally to the sophisticated medical technologies of today, humanity's relationship with mortality has undergone dramatic transformation.

From ancient civilizations to modern societies, the concept of death has continuously evolved, though its essence remains largely unchanged and gloomy. For ancient civilizations, the dead were not simply gone; they transitioned into another realm, often a parallel existence interacting with the living world. Gradually, ideas of good and bad deeds emerged, followed by concepts of heaven and hell. Later came the distinction between soul and body, and later still the idea of the soul as part of an absolute whole. Although words like "late" and "later" are used, it would be inappropriate to place these developments within a strict chronological framework. The cognitive revolution had already occurred long ago, and the Neolithic revolution had made life more comfortable than ever before. The hesitant footsteps of the

primeval human were transforming into giant leaps toward unseen and unknown goals.

This Neolithic revolution was not merely a reorientation of economy, society, and civic behavior, it was a transformation of life itself. Yet this reorientation unfolded slowly and unevenly across cultures and races, leading to varied concepts and visualizations of death and afterlife.

This evolution has never been linear; rather, it is a complex interplay of fear, fascination, denial, and acceptance, woven into the very fabric of human civilization. The fabric remains, its common threads, Gordian knots, and loose ends intact, continuing the dance across the annals of history.

An intriguing observation is that major civilizations and religions, though separated by vast distances and generations, share common rallying points: the transience of life, death, the afterlife, the eternal nature of the soul, heaven and hell, deeds determining destiny, and gods and goddesses bearing different names but performing remarkably similar roles. These similarities across variations make the narrative more comprehensible.

It cannot be mere coincidence that such shared ideas arose independently among peoples separated by centuries and geography, without communication or connectivity, the privilege we possess today. This convergence lends historical substance to what might otherwise be dismissed as mythology.

Despite variations, the unique artifacts of indelible footprints have been passed down with reverence from generation to generation, finding expression in tales, myths, legends, proverbs, poems, folklore, writings, paintings, and sacred scriptures. Philosophers have devoted lifetimes to unraveling these mysteries. Since death is an inseparable part of life, whether we accept it or not, it is bound to occur. Rather than avoiding it,

understanding its meaning becomes essential. *The Fantasy of Dying* is a small step toward unscrambling this enduring riddle.

Not only death, but the afterlife has also fascinated humanity, owing to the profound enigmas and unanswered questions it carries. What, if anything, continues when the body remains behind? The afterlife is often understood as a continued existence in which the essential aspect of an individual's consciousness or identity survives physical death. This surviving essence varies across belief systems, it may be a fragment or the entirety of the soul or spirit, carrying personal identity forward.

Michael Meade, the American writer and mythologist, in *Fate and Destiny*, cites an old Celtic proverb: "*Death is the middle of a long life.*" Ancient cultures placed death at the center of existence rather than casting it aside or postponing reflection until the final moment. Living close to nature, they observed how forests grew from fallen trees and how death replenished life itself. This perspective views death not as the enemy of life, but as its necessary companion. Only the unwise and the excessively fearful believe death to be the blind adversary of living.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Vikramjeet (born on 14 June 1963) is a dedicated medical professional, humanitarian, and social worker, known for his commitment to serving society through affordable and ethical healthcare. He is the co-founder of the Dr. Agam Samiksha Foundation (Regd.), established in November 2023, with the mission of making quality medical services accessible to all sections of society, especially the underprivileged.

He completed his graduation from Guru Gobind Singh medical college and hospital Faridkot and later post graduation from Government Medical college and Rajindra Hospital Patiala.

In collaboration with Aashirwad Hospital, Sri Muktsar Sahib, Dr. Vikramjeet has been actively involved in providing low-cost medical treatment, promoting health awareness, and supporting various community welfare initiatives. His leadership style reflects integrity, humility, and a people-centric approach.

Beyond his medical profession, Dr. Vikramjeet is a person of creative and spiritual inclination. He is fond of writing, singing, and dancing, which reflect his vibrant and expressive personality. He has a keen interest in Hindu philosophy and spirituality, has studied the Bhagavad Gita, and is currently engaged in writing a book on Buddhism, reflecting his deep interest in understanding life, ethics, and human values through spiritual wisdom.

Dr. Vikramjeet's life stands as a blend of medical service, cultural richness, and spiritual depth. His vision is to build a healthier, more aware, and compassionate society where service to humanity remains the highest priority.



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