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# The Gift of Life: Death As Teacher in the Aghori Sect

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This article utilizes the example of the Aghori, with their radical and unique perspective on death, as a challenge to the Western world to live an authentic, present life by maintaining awareness of mortality. Specifically, three main themes are explored: first, a theoretical engagement of the concept of death based on the (Western) philosophy of existentialism, second, a review of the historical origins and philosophy of the Aghori sect, and third, a depiction of the Aghoris as a living example of vigorously accepting death as an inevitability of life. On this basis a brief comparison of Western and Eastern attitudes towards life and death will be offered.

**Keywords:** *existentialism, Aghori, authenticity, self, spirituality, death*

Death presents an unknown element that speaks of a certain but unknown future, yet remains an untouchable predicament in the present. The future is and always will be an unknown experience, a reality that will not be known until it is made present, yet it guides the force of intentionality. For example, a person works to resolve financial obligations over time. They have a “plan” on how to pay off their balances, but reality of such a payoff is in the future. It is unclear whether they will achieve their goal, but they are guided in hope to meet their intentions. Death holds this sort of sway over the present moment: people know it exists; an inevitable, ethereal experience—the final act. Yet, rather than living each waking moment as if it were the last, many try to avoid confronting “a way of being for which [they] are never prepared” (Bugental, 2008, p. 334). The present moment is all that exists and to live fully, the awareness of each moment is a true gift.

American culture is a culture of death repression (May, 1996, 1981/1999). People seem to exist in a constant state of apparent deception around the reality of death. According to May, people continually repress death to avoid the fear and anxiety that accompanies it. The fear of death affects the very experience of living, of emotions and relationships. Even more, American culture has learned to use mortuary rituals as a means to “celebrate” the experience, or lack thereof, of death (Metcalf & Huntington, 1991). Fear, then, takes form as it allows death to be something that remains “out there,” while people utilize mortuary systems to tend

to the deceased so that the living can avoid existing with the dead. People make deliberate efforts to avoid engaging the emotions and realities surrounding death, such as focusing on looking younger. Yet avoiding the emotional content that often arises around the topic of death creates an inauthentic way of being, a sort of repression. If Westerners allowed themselves to recognize death as a natural part of existence, a fuller encounter of life might be experienced (May, 1981/1999; Yalom, 1980).

In contrast to the American or Western perspective, there exist several other paradigms of death that draw from philosophical and spiritual traditions. Such paradigms offer a radical conception of death; it provides the human being with a more nuanced perspective on the significance of death in one’s life. Such a perspective may be found in the Eastern paradigm of death, particularly in India.

India alone is home to thousands of spiritual teachers, traditions, and sects, all of which present diverse views on life and death. However, one particular sect that offers a revolutionary idea of death is the Aghori sect of North India. This sect provides a remarkable glimpse of what it means to live in the present moment, in the here and now, revering death as a spiritual teacher instead of a subject that should be avoided.

The focus of this article is three-fold: (a) a theoretical engagement with the concept of death based on the (Western) philosophy of existentialism; (b) a brief review of the historical origins and philosophy

of the Aghori sect; and (c) a depiction of the Aghoris as a living example of vigorously accepting death as an inevitability of life. It is hoped that a review of these subjects will provide the reader an overview of some of the broad cultural and philosophical differences in Western and Eastern notions of death, as well as shed light on the Aghoris, a sect that is rarely discussed in modern India.

### **Existentialism and Death**

Life is full of anxiety, which is a significant part of being human. Death is an anxious reality of life that Western individuals commonly try to avoid facing (Becker, 1973/1997; Kubler-Ross, 1997; Yalom, 1980). Many people focus on living in a way that is as comfortable as possible, and tend to try to avoid the various anxieties that may come with being alive (e.g., sense of uneasiness; see May, 1950/1996). However, to attempt to avoid or escape anxiety is futile. Life is a terminal experience. It is a journey to which each person who lives it knows that a definite result will come forth: We cease to be.

The complexity of facing one's own mortality should not be confused with loss and grief. People experience loss uniquely and, for most, to experience the death of a loved one may prove difficult for others to relate to, especially if they have not experienced a loss themselves (Bonnano & Kaltman, 2001). This is not to say people cannot be empathic or even sympathetic with those who are grieving, but that it is difficult to relate to the pain of loss if it has never been experienced. One's own death, however, is an experience that cannot be compared or shared with others. It is an individual experience that is endured on the utmost lonely path of exiting an anxious, living being.

If there is no escaping death, why do so many people try to exist superficially without acknowledging its presence? The interest in discovering more behind death and its impact upon existence is deeply rooted in the desire to understand how being authentic in the world and accepting the mortality of life are complementary. Death is unavoidable, yet it seems that if people are not accepting of their transience, the ensuing anxiety of death will and can impair an authentic way of being. It is important to know about death in this fashion because it is an ingrained part of life that permeates the soul. Wisdom comes in the humility of understanding (Sternberg, 1990). Understanding death then requires conceptualizing how death impacts a person's authentic

way of being. Specifically, it requires awareness about the human potential for how an individual may remain genuine in his or her sense of self while accepting his or her own mortality.

Death is a reality that cannot be ignored as it is a *now* or a present moment concept. Death is always present and can strike anyone at any time. So to defer or deny its reality is a damaging event upon the authenticity of an individual. Denying something that is an authentic aspect to living can degrade the individual's ability to be and become fully alive. This is because the individual works so hard to avoid experiencing the phenomena associated with the concept of death. When it comes to death, people do not just have anxiety about the concept itself, rather, they dread the fact that they "are and are not"—the verity of finitude (Barrett, 1958, p. 227).

Imagine for a moment what life might be like if peace were experienced each time the thought of death crossed into awareness. What would this experience look and feel like? People tend to avoid the thoughts and feelings associated with death because of the terror that can arise from the awareness that death is inevitable (Kastenbaum, 2000; Kubler-Ross, 1997; May, 1981/1999; Tomer, 1994; Yalom, 1980). Confronting death takes a considerable amount of energy from an individual. For those who endure life and avoid recognizing death—avoid topics, conversations, live so busily as to not think about it—the energy placed in avoidance can deplete fuller living potentials and discoveries (Becker, 1973/1997). This is not to say that recognizing an individual's own mortality is an insurmountable task, but that it takes courage to accept. In doing so, people may become freer to live alongside the nature of a mortal world. This freedom allows them to be open to making different choices they may not otherwise consider—being more available to friends who lost loved ones, taking risks such as flying—thus potentially unlocking greater depth in living. If one were to examine those individuals who try to avoid recognizing death's existence through their behaviors, what would be found? Avoiding thoughts and feelings that are associated with death can build barriers which may create for people not just a type of anxiety about dying, but also an anxiety about living (Scull, 1989).

The Aghoris would not embrace a lifestyle that avoided recognition of death's existence. Rather, they would fully emphasize in their daily lives that

acknowledging and respecting death is one of the fundamental principles of living an authentic life. Consider the following overview of the Aghori traditions and philosophical orientations toward life and death.

### Historical Origins of the Aghori

Nestled on the banks of the Ganges River in North India is one of the holiest and renowned places for pilgrimage: Varanasi or Benares. Benares has been considered the cultural, spiritual and religious metropolis of northern India for centuries. Delving into the history of Benares, the city was referred to as *Kasi* or *Kashi*, “the luminous one” in a symbolic appreciation of the city’s prominence for the arts and culture. It is also believed that Lord Shiva, the destroyer of the universe in Hindu cosmology, created the city, therefore making Benares the most religious hub of India. Barrett (2002), in his description of Benares, stated:

Indeed, more than a million pilgrims a year visit Benares for the same reason that they bathe in the Ganga: to purify themselves of pollution and sin so as to attain a better standard of living and/or liberation for themselves and their families in this life and the next. (p. 87)

Benares is also the home and birthplace of the Aghori sect. Although Benares is a city of purification for millions of visitors who bathe in the Ganges, it is also considered the city of pollution and defilement, as observed from the practices and rituals of the Aghoris. Therefore, it is no coincidence that in the broader picture of Hinduism and Hindu cosmology and philosophy, Benares is considered the city of polarities, where materialism and spirituality encounter each other in a way that cannot be explained, only experienced.

It is within this context that the philosophy and history of the Aghori sect can be brought to light. Aghori ascetics belong to the Aghora discipline and consider themselves devotees of the Hindu god Shiva. Hence, the main center of the Aghori culture is Benares. The main *ashram* or spiritual community of the Aghoris is situated in Benares, where Kina Ram Aghori’s *samadhi* (final resting place) resides—an important place for Aghori pilgrimages. Kina Ram was an ascetic who is said to have lived to approximately 150 years of age during the second half of the eighteenth century, and recognized as an incarnation of the Hindu god Shiva.

Going further back into the history of the Aghori sect, it is believed that that the northern Indian

Kapalika sects were the founding fathers of the Aghoris. These religious groups appeared between the 7<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries and utilized antinomian practices as a means toward spiritual liberation (Barrett, 2002). The term Kapalika is derived from the word *kapalin* or one who carries a skull. Lorenzen (1991) described kapalin as an individual “with a skull and staff, living on alms, announcing his deed (as he begs), and eating little food” (p. 13).

Having few possessions and living a solitary life, it is of no wonder that the Kapalikas did not belong to a structured organization. Hence, their lineage or ancestry continues to be a mystery, leaving historians speculating on the origins and nature of this religious sect. With their religious and philosophical roots in Advaita Vedanta, the Aghoris follow a monist way of life. Advaita is the non-dualistic school of Vedanta philosophy that affirms the oneness of the individual soul, God, and the universe. In other words, the essence of Advaita philosophy is the acceptance of *Brahman* (creator) and *atman* (soul) as a single identity. According to Advaita philosophy, there is no difference between God and man, self and other, good and bad, or purity and impurity. They are all Brahman. This world is a mere illusory projection upon the one Reality (Parthasarathy, 2001). A renowned guru of India, Sathya Sai Baba (2002) succinctly described the basis of Advaita philosophy: “Though the appearances may be different and there may be varieties of experience, it is asserted that in all these, there is one thing present, namely, the unifying spirit” (p. 30).

### Defining Aghori

The word “Aghora” implies several meanings: deeper than deep, illumined, or the absence of darkness. From a spiritual and transpersonal perspective, the word Aghora is the transformation of darkness into light; a transformation of the finite human consciousness into the effulgence of the Absolute Reality or the Whole. Aghora is the apotheosis of Tantra, the Indian religion whose Supreme Deity is the Mother Goddess (Svaboda, 1986).

The dictionary definition of the Hindi term Aghori according to Chaturvedi and Tiwari (1989, as cited in Gupta, 1993) is: “A filthy, uncouth and unclean (man); detestable; one who engages in indiscriminate eating; a member of the order of mendicants called ‘aghor panth’” (p. 16).

In general, the Aghori sect is comprised of men who are considered to follow the lineage of Lord Shiva.

It is seldom that women are consecrated into the sect. A vernacular understanding of the term Aghori is often ascribed to ideas of Aghoris as being satanic worshippers, or followers of an extremely sadistic cult, with very little attention paid to the religious or spiritual components of the Aghori sect. More often than not, within an urban setting, Aghoris have been perceived as individuals with mental illness.

Contrary to the above descriptions, Gupta (1993) described her encounters with the Aghoris as conventional in their appearance and manner, being well groomed and mild mannered by local standards. This description stands in stark contrast to the popular beliefs about the Aghoris as being either clad in black robes or even half naked, their body being exposed to the elements.

The Aghoris have been a relatively secretive sect in India, drawing attention from curious outsiders and spectators because of their understandably aberrant and inappropriate behaviors and rituals. Consumption of intoxicants such as alcohol and marijuana, intake of human and animal flesh and secretions (which is more ritualistic), meditating upon corpses, the adorning of skulls and bones and ill-clad bodies are some of the explicit characteristics of the Aghori.

To the common person such activities and rituals are offensive and may be considered to be of very little spiritual and transformative value. If the essence of Indian spirituality is to detach oneself from the physical and material enticements of the world, the consumption of intoxicants appears to hardly justify the basis for spirituality. However, understood from a more esoteric perspective, the Aghoris do in fact exemplify a devotion to the numinous. The words of Svoboda (1986) illuminate this idea:

When an Aghori takes a lot of intoxicants he feels like going to the smashan and being alone with his thoughts.... He feels like telling everyone he meets, "Leave me alone!" And if he covers himself with ashes and remains naked and shouts obscenities, no one is likely to come near, and he can be in his mood all day long. This is one of the reasons Aghoris act the way they do. (p. 173)

The central feature that pronounces the Aghori's practice to be spiritual in nature is the monistic or non-dualistic approach to life. The Aghora discipline promotes the abolition of all thoughts of duality. For

the Aghori, just as it is in Advaita philosophy, there is only one Reality; it is vital to eliminate all perceptions of duality: good and bad, pleasurable and painful, and more. The Aghori makes no discrimination against these dualities. Similarly, he makes no distinction between life and death.

A brief description of the ashram may provide some insight into the Aghori's beliefs and attitudes towards life and death. The ashram continues to be the headquarters for the Aghoris and Aghori devotees. The *dhuni*, or sacred fire, perpetually burns, symbolizing the metaphoric relationship to the funeral pyre of the *smashan* or cremation grounds. The ash from the fire is considered to be very sacred and distributed to the devotees, a reminder of the concrete and liberating nature of death.

According to Svaboda (1986), the funeral pyre is the ultimate reality; a continual reminder that everyone has to die. Death is personified and even deified. Aghoris are not concerned with the physical death, but yearn for the annihilation of the limitations of their physical being. There is no fear of death because everything we possess and wish to possess is impermanent. Death is in reality the release from the physical shackles, which the Aghoris break free from when they embrace or adopt death as the only medium of transcendence. The entire world is a smashan for the Aghori because every single individual is born to die.

It is fascinating that the Aghoris have developed and employ rituals as a means of embracing death, with the ferocious desire to transcend the world of illusion (Svaboda, 1986). The ritual practices, although seemingly bizarre, are symbols of the Aghoris' non-dualistic beliefs. For instance, the corpse upon which the Aghori meditates is a symbol of his own body and the corpse devouring ritual is a symbol of the transcendence of his lower self and a realization of the greater, all pervading Self. Cannibalism is also closely associated with Aghori rituals. Eating human flesh is yet another reminder to the Aghori that there exists no distinction between good or bad, human or animal flesh. Such distinctions are only delusive, and seldom serve any purpose in the spiritual development of the human soul. As Gupta (1993) illuminated the above point, she stated:

It is important to keep in mind that whether or not one has actually eaten human flesh is not the point. It is the act of subscribing to the idea of eating

human flesh (and other revolting substances) that is important. (p. 82)

In the same vein, the use of skulls is not an unusual feature in the ritualistic practices of the Aghori. Gupta (1993) recounted her encounter with an Aghori who described the use of skulls in great detail:

It is believed that after death, in the top of the skull there clings a minute particle or *prana*, or life force of the deceased. Using mantras and certain offerings, especially alcohol, an aghor sadhna summons the spirit to return to the body, and gaining control over it, harnesses its services. (p. 83)

Through these rituals the Aghori comes to realize the elusive nature of all phenomena and the ultimate truth of selflessness. It could be said then, that the Aghoris use their rituals symbolically to transform the prosaic mind into one that is only concerned with the divine.

#### **Aghori and Western Cultures: A Comparison**

Death has a way of forcing people to confront the finiteness of living. There is great fear in having to confront mortality in Western cultures. When people engage the notion that they will die, they must endure the fear that they will cease to be. This fear of death scares people at their core being because it symbolizes the end of existence. The fear of no longer being can have an overwhelming impact upon living (discussed later on; also see Kubler-Ross, 1997).

On the other hand, the confrontation with death, as exemplified by the Aghoris, forces people to examine the inevitability that life will end. Confronting death allows people to live fuller, authentic lives. If people choose to avoid or deny the reality of death, they continue to live in false comfort and inauthenticity (May, 1981/1999; Yalom, 1980). Authentic living is the ability to live in congruence and in accordance with the realities of life. For example, if people accept that one day they will die, then they have begun to live authentically. There are forces in life that cannot be controlled by people, but rather require a level of respect and acknowledgement about their presence. Death is a force that cannot be controlled. Living authentically means that people must be able to face their own death and acknowledge that death will occur with or without their permission. In doing this, people can live fuller, more meaningfully authentic lives.

In contrast to people from Western cultures, the Aghoris can be described as exemplars of the authentic acceptance of death as a vehicle of transcendence and transformation of the “self.” The Aghoris demonstrate that there is no distinction between life and death. The philosophy of non-duality is of prime significance. For the Aghori ascetic, the concept of death is honored for it is the only transformer of the limited human personality into the divine or the Absolute personality. Hence, according to the Aghori philosophy, what prevents us from living authentically is the fear of death, the final breath of life. If we can embrace death as a teacher, like the Aghoris do, we are freer to live in the present moment and perhaps have a greater appreciation for life.

#### **Death: What Can It Teach?**

Knowing more about how death impacts people’s way of living can provide an understanding to the possibility of living more freely and fully. The hope here is to know more about the fear and dread people have about death. It seems that people live inauthentic lives because the fear of death has a compelling grip on people and most choose to avoid engaging its impact. They live in denial to a fact that is unavoidable and yet can provide a meaningful path to living a more full life. To deny the fact of death in existence is a deliberate act of being inauthentic to *self* (May, 1996, 1981/1999). According to May, the self is the “who I am” that people are in every experience, as living and dying beings. In order to be authentic to the self, people must acknowledge the fact of mortality or increased fear and anxiety might consume their ability to be authentic (e.g., avoiding confrontation with death; Tomer, 1994; Yalom, 1980).

For most part, the conceptual framework of death has been strictly defined by and relegated to Western interpretation. With their monistic philosophy and their passionate reverence of death, the Aghoris bring to light a completely different interpretation of death, based on an Eastern philosophy. In the Eastern way of life, the concept of death is not regarded as something to be feared but to be embraced for what it is: the great transformer; the incinerator of limitations. Grof (2000) summarized this by describing the attitudes of the Western industrial civilization in comparison to the Eastern civilization:

Their cosmologies, philosophies, mythologies, as well as spiritual and ritual life, contain a clear message that death is not the absolute and irrevocable end

of everything. They provide assurance for the dying that life or existence continues in some form beyond that biological demise.... For a Westerner, a visit to a place like Benares where this attitude is expressed in its extreme form can be a profoundly shattering experience. (p. 223-224)

The concept of death needs to be continually engaged through existential philosophy. Existentialism attempts to confront and bring forth experiences (through looking at themes, such as death), which impact and form people's way of engaging life. People have been reinforced by their own views and societal influence to acknowledge that death occurs, but not to embrace its reality. To embrace the reality of death means that people must face the fear of terminal end that accompanies living. This downplays the significance death has upon existence. Complementary to this notion of death's significance are the specifiable psychological conditions of which people should be aware. For example, people endure losing someone they know to death at some point in their lives. People who attempt to avoid the emotions and thoughts that accompany the death are susceptible to experiencing psychological distress (e.g., depression). To exist as if death is not going to "affect me," is to live inauthentically and create psychological disarray. Living in such an inauthentic way has major traumatic implications for future survival.

Consider the case of the attack of September 11, 2001 (Pyszczynski, Solomon, & Greenberg, 2002). Some of the people, who were exposed to the events firsthand developed symptoms of depression, posttraumatic stress disorder, and various other psychological conditions. On the other hand, there were people who personally experienced the attacks and had little to no experiences of psychological distress. This lack of distress was attributed to the fact that these certain individuals were aware that death is natural, unavoidable, and that it may happen at any moment in life. They had allowed themselves to experience the loss, immense sorrow, pain, and sadness that were evoked from the terrorists' attacks. They were able to take the experiences and hopefully move forward with living.

The dark fear of death can plague people throughout their lives. To live authentically, one has to traverse the path of *ghora* (darkness) and emerge into Aghora (light). Death's talons disturb the waters of life for each person in a unique way. Some may not be

impacted by its reality, yet others might be paralyzed by the overwhelming anxiety it may arouse.

People live each waking day bombarded with a myriad of experiences that may or may not provoke anxious reactions. Both Yalom and Becker (1973/1997) emphasized how the anxiety about death influences how people live their daily lives. Yet, when people are closer to death and have little to distract them from attending to its nature, some may begin to live even more fully. Yalom (2008) poignantly highlighted an experience of how death was slowly stealing a dear friend to the darkness of dementia, and discovered that "when one loses everything, there remains the pleasure of sheer being" (p. 291). People who face death, even in extreme circumstances, often gain a deep sense of appreciation for life once faced with the prospect of dying, thus creating an anxiety that fuels the potential for deeper living (May, 1996/1950; Scull, 1989). Regardless of one's views on mortality and the anxiety it provokes in existence, death still has a profound impact upon how people choose how to live (or not).

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