

## Chapter 19

### To Die While Still Alive: Lord Shiva's Message for Modern Living

Rochelle Suri

What is the purpose of being born? To recognize yourself, to realize that you are neither the body nor the mind but rather the Eternal Soul which is the Ultimate Unity.

Robert Svoboda, 1986, p. 109

Life and death are two opposing forces; a dynamic that is inevitable and in constant flux. To be born is to die, and to die is to be born.

Across all religions, cultures, sects, and traditions, life and death are significant concepts and elements. There is no escape from death, only refuge—refuge from the uncertainty and anxiety of life. Life, as experienced in the 21st century, is riddled with chaos, anxiety, stress, isolation, and competition, among several other strains that come with living in an urban city.

Urban life in today's India highlights and emphasizes the struggles of life and the intense drive to sustain life and lifestyle that are a departure from authentic Indian living. By authentic Indian life, I refer to the focus on unity, not duality; the connection with nature and spirit; the importance of community as opposed to individuality and technology; and the acceptance of mortality versus the preservation and the pursuit of youth.

This chapter offers insight into the concept of life and death as presented and represented by Lord Shiva, one of the primary gods in Hindu mythology. For Shiva, there is no separation between life and death because duality is but an illusion. From death emerges life, and this constant cycle leads to *moksha*, or liberation from life on earth. By *moksha*, Shiva is liberating human incarnation from the illusionary world of *kama* (desire), *krodha* (anger), *moha* (delusion), *mada* (pride), and *lobha* (greed), all of which binds individuals to earth and prevents them from realizing their true nature of existence. Shiva is a perpetual force in Hindu mythology, whose role is to remind people of the illusion of life or *maya*, and its liberation through death, death being the great equalizer.

### Lord Shiva

Replete with symbols, legends, and folklore from all corners of the country, India is a Mecca for myths. From the pantheon of Hindu gods to old wives' tales, India resounds with a variety of myths that every kind of psyche can subscribe to. There is a God for every psychic season, a myth for every hidden wish, and a legend for every concealed anxiety (Kakar, 1991). Irrespective of religion, caste, creed, or social status, Indians generally are innately drawn to myths, without which life would be dull and mundane.

Of such legends and myths, Lord Shiva is a significant and popular entity amongst the Hindus. As with every god and goddess, there are varying stories and descriptions on the origins and birth of Shiva. Popular legend has it that Shiva originated when Lord Brahma (the creator of the universe) and Lord Vishnu (the preserver of creation) were debating which of them was more omnipotent and powerful. They were suddenly interrupted by the appearance of a blazing pillar, whose roots and branches expanded beyond view, into the earth and sky. Curious to know what this magnificent structure was, the gods decided to morph themselves into animals and investigate. Brahma became a goose and ascended into the skies to the top of the pillar; Vishnu turned into a boar and dug into the earth in search of the roots. With no luck to their attempt, the two gods returned to earth only to find Shiva emerge from an opening in the pillar. In awe of his power and majesty, they accepted him as the third ruler of the universe, thereby becoming the *trimurti* (three forms of god), the trinity of supreme divinity in Hinduism (Winternitz, 1972). Shiva is considered the destroyer of the universe, among other things, in Hindu mythology.

Of significance to existential psychology and to one of the existential givens, death, Shiva embraces and embodies the contradiction and the cycle of life and death. It is important to note that where Shiva is concerned death does not refer to the physical body or human mortality. It refers to our limited perceptions and misconceptions of life, of the illusions of separateness and the misnomer that life is limited to physical existence. For Shiva, it is the death of the ego or *ahankara* (the identification or attachment to one's ego). In Hindu scriptures, *ahankara* is the false ego, by which the soul misidentifies with the material body (Eknath, 1985, p. 870): the "I" consciousness (the sense of being an individual, separate from others, identifying oneself subjectively as a distinct ego). In Hinduism, as depicted through the Bhagavad Gita, Lord Krishna instructs Arjuna that *ahankara*, should be eliminated and subordinated to the Lord, for the self is not and cannot be present when one is in a state of *ahankara*.

There are several aspects and nuances that Shiva represents in Hindu mythology, very often contradicting one another. His paradoxical nature makes him a complex entity, sometimes misunderstood and misinterpreted by his followers. Shiva is the ascetic, and the loving husband to Goddess Parvati; he embodies the destructive powers, as well as the creative energy of life; there is a fierceness to his expression but also a softness and kindness in his gaze, and he is

the wrathful god, as well as the meditative yogi, seated at his abode in Mount Kailash. In many ways, he manifests the many complexities and contradictions that are inherent in human existence as well as those contradictions that propel and create existential angst.

Existential anxiety or angst is natural and inevitable, stemming from the internal conflicts that are pervasive and accompany every human journey. However, it is also avoidable if one eliminates the veil of *maya* and recognizes and appreciates that there is no duality in thought or object, but only unity. It may be easier said than done. However, a closer look at Shiva and his approach to unity, through the concept of death, will afford the reader a new and radical insight.

### Shiva: The Aghori

Life is transient, especially in Hindu philosophy where every human being is subject to the cycle of death and reincarnation. It is not uncommon to avoid contemplating or discussing death for it is a subject that compels one to question and confront the meaning and purpose of life. All people are destined for death, irrespective of caste, creed, race, or color; "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" (Suri & Pitchford, 2010, p. 129). However, this is not the case for Shiva, whose very existence is authentic and embracing death.

Among his many roles, manifestations, and powers, Lord Shiva is profoundly known for his relationship with death and destruction. Shiva is the first *aghora* in Hindu scriptures. The word *aghora* implies several meanings: deeper than deep, illumined, or the absence of darkness. Aghora is the transformation of the finite human consciousness into the effulgence of the Absolute Reality or the Whole (Svoboda, 1986).

An *Aghori* originates from the Aghora sect, and 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 essence, Aghoris are devotees of Shiva, ascetics who seek moksha from the cycle of reincarnation or *samsara*. Based on their monistic doctrine, the Aghoris believe that all opposites are only illusory, as evidenced through their various customs and rituals, which are rarely understood by the layperson. For instance, cannibalism, urophagia, and corpophagia, are common and essential practices of an Aghori. "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" (Suri & Pitchford, 2010, p. 131). The *smashan* or the cremation ground is the perennial home for the Aghori, where the funeral pyre is the ultimate reality and a continual reminder that everyone has to die. Commenting on the Aghoris, Barrett (2002) states:

The gurus and disciples of Aghor believe their state to be primordial and universal. They believe that all human beings are natural-born Aghori. Hari Baba has said on several occasions that human babies of all societies are without discrimination, that they will play as much in their own filth as with the toys around them. Children become progressively discriminating as they grow older and learn the culturally specific attachments and aversions of their parents. Children become increasingly aware of their mortality as they bump their heads and fall to the ground. They come to fear their mortality and then palliate this fear by finding ways to deny it altogether. (p. 161)

For the Aghoris, every soul is pure, is shiva, but is tainted by *astamahapasa*, "eight nooses or bonds," which prevent self-realization and moksha. Thus, the practices of the Aghoris are centered on the removal of these bonds, and the recognition of, what existentialism refers to as, restricted existence.

Returning to the first Aghori, Shiva reminds his devotees of the ever-pervasive concept of *kayanta* (*kaya* means body; *anta* means ending). *Kayanta* refers to "where the body ends," not "where life ends"—yet another indication that mortality is a natural culmination of life. One of Shiva's homes is the *smashan* (*shma* refers to corpse; *shan* refers to bed), where bodies are laid to rest. The *smashan* is a reminder of the impermanence and futility of attachment to desires and promotes the awareness and importance of self-actualization.

Fundamentally, there are two forces that are constantly guiding human existence: the instinct of survival and the instinct of self-actualization. To survive means to focus and safeguard our basic needs and resources; it restricts and limits one's personal and spiritual growth. Where self-actualization is concerned, there is movement toward self-expansion, which involves higher levels of self-awareness, deeper connection with spirit and nature, and detachment from material objects and desires—all of which promote growth, an essential ingredient for moksha. In this sense, Shiva's disciples and the Aghoris are aware that death is a part of creation, and to merely survive prevents one from making his or her life process intense, worthwhile, and meaningful.

In many ways, Maslow's (1970) concept of self-actualization mirrors Shiva's symbolism and dichotomy between life and death. There are several characteristics of a self-actualized human being, one of them being an "accurate perception of reality" (Heylighen, 1992, p.42). In other words, self-actualizers are "attracted towards the unknown, rather than afraid of it like most people" (Heylighen, p.42). They are unafraid and uninhibited by the unknown, including death, and do not shy away from or fear what may be daunting or unapproachable. Maslow (1970) further indicates that self-actualizers are also comfortable with the "transcendence of dichotomies," wherein they exercise a conscious decision to not make a choice "between two apparently opposite behaviors, but find a way of

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solving the problem which synthesizes the advantages of the two alternatives, without the disadvantages" (Heylighen, 1992, p.44).

These notions of the self-actualizers are synchronistic with the Aghoris and with Shiva. Keeping with the theme of life and death, a significant and inherent dichotomy in and of itself, Maslow and Shiva speak the same language. They urge one to be open and receiving of death and the unknown rather than denying and fearing it. They emphasize the recognition and steadfast acceptance of non-duality over duality. To this idea, Suri and Pitchford (2010) speak 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. (p. 131)

### **Tandava: Shiva's Cosmic Dance**

A final point on death, as espoused by Shiva, is the *tandava* or the cosmic dance. In Hindu mythology, the *tandava* signifies the cosmic cycles of creation and destruction, as well as the natural cycle of birth and death. Specifically, the *tandava* embodies and consists of five elements that flow in the following rhythm: *srishti* (creation), *stithi* (preservation), *samhara* (destruction), *tirobhava* (illusion), and *anugaraha* (release, emancipation), (Coomaraswamy, 1957).

In tandem with the illusory idea or *maya* of life and death, the *tandava* is one more reminder of the constant rhythm and cycle of cosmic energy. Even modern physics does not fail to recognize and applaud the significance and depth of meaning of the *tandava*. Capra (1975) states that

Modern physics has thus revealed that every subatomic particle not only performs an energy dance, but also is an energy dance; a pulsating process of creation and destruction. The dance of Shiva is the dancing universe, the ceaseless flow of energy going through an infinite variety of patterns that melt into one another. For the modern physicists then, Shiva's dance is the dance of subatomic matter. As in Hindu mythology, it is a continual dance of creation and destruction involving the whole cosmos; the basis of all existence and of all natural phenomenon. (p. 245)

Nothing is static, but only dynamic; nothing is permanent, for the hallmark of life is change. The journey of life is, and can be, an enriching and highly meaningful experience. The constant journey from birth to death and from death to rebirth, according to Hindu philosophy, can be transformed and transmuted if human

beings pay closer attention to and personify Shiva's message. This message resounds in Svoboda's (1986) words:

Remember, the entire world is a smashan for an Aghori. Everyone is born with their death fixed, which means to an Aghori they are all dead already; they are all already skeletons. The juices which must be dried up are all the juicy thoughts which keep you bound down to the world by perpetually producing desires. If you can dry these up mentally you can do whatever you please physically... But only when these juices of desire have dried up can the *real* juice of life—the *Amrita* (nectar of immortality)—be obtained. (p. 181)

The Aghoris, the tandava, and all of Shiva's complexities and contradictions mirror and reinforce the flaws of focusing on duality, while echoing the spiritual and physical rewards of practicing non-duality, the most important reward being moksha.

### Conclusion

The topography of Hinduism is vast and complex, rich and fertile with symbols, myth, rituals, and the divine. Although the world today is a highly technologically advanced world, and while the idea of separateness proliferates through the predominantly individualistic culture, there is hope that the human psyche can turn toward a creation of a spiritually virile life and the unity of the human spirit. Svoboda (1986) lends strength to this idea by asking people to "die, while still alive." He says:

To die while still alive means to extinguish all thought of dualities. The Universal Soul is single, not dual, so you must eliminate all perceptions of duality: desirable and nondesirable; pleasant and painful, interesting and boring, and so on. Does a corpse care about anything? No, not a thing—and you must become a corpse, in the eyes of the world, if you want to succeed as an Aghora. (p. 181)

It is good for one to become this corpse, and continually die, in an attempt to live and illumine one's mind, remembering that every living moment, every minute of life should, in reality, be the death or destruction of any notion or belief that perpetuates and eternalizes duality.

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