

The Transfiguration of the Human Being

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[M]en die but live again in the real world of *Wakan-Tanka* [Great Spirit], where there is nothing but the spirits of all things; and this true life we may know here on earth if we purify our bodies and minds, thus coming closer to *Wakan-Tanka*, who is all-purity.¹

Black Elk

[Y]our glory lies where you cease to exist.²

Ramana Maharshi

While living / Be a dead man.³

Bunan Zenji

The kingdom of God is for none but the thoroughly dead.⁴

Meister Eckhart

He has died to self and become living through the Lord.⁵

Rūmī

Perhaps the most beneficial way to prepare for death is to recognize that we are in fact going to die. Although we cannot deny this fact, we can selectively defer thinking about death; yet the dilemma is that the overarching reality of death is always there side-by-side with life itself. Despite this ubiquity, 'Man was created alone and he dies alone.'⁶

1. Black Elk, quoted in Joseph Epes Brown, 'Inipi: The Rite of Purification', in *The Sacred Pipe: Black Elk's Account of the Seven Rites of the Oglala Sioux* (Norman OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1989), p. 32.

2. Ramana Maharshi, *The Teachings of Ramana Maharshi in His Own Words*, ed. A. Osborne (New York: Samuel Weiser, 1978), p. 100.

3. Bunan Zenji, quoted in Daisetz T. Suzuki, *Zen and Japanese Culture* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1959), p. 102.

4. Sayings §11, in *Meister Eckhart*, vol. 1, trans. C. de B. Evans (London: John M. Watkins, 1924), p. 419.

5. *Mathnawī* III.3364, in *The Mathnawī of Jalālud'dīn Rūmī*, vol. 4, trans. R. A. Nicholson (Cambridge University Press, 1930), p. 189.

6. Frithjof Schuon, *Light on the Ancient Worlds*, trans. Lord Northbourne (Bloomington IN: World Wisdom Books, 1984), p. 119.

Since the most remote times there has been a practice of continuously living with the awareness of death in one's consciousness. The words of the adage *Memento mori*, Latin for 'Remember that you are mortal', encapsulate this practice. All the saints and sages speak in unanimity of identification with the empirical ego or separate self as the source of all human suffering. As Śrī Rāmakrishna (1836–1886), the Paramahansa of Dakshineswar, a spiritual luminary, powerfully expressed the need to die to our lower nature: 'When "I" is dead, all troubles cease.'⁷ An essential element in the world's religions is the injunction that finds expression, for instance, in the well-known words of the Prophet of Islam: 'Die before ye die' (*mūtū qabla an tamūtū*).⁸ Correspondingly within the Hindu tradition there is the concept of being 'twice-born' (*dvija*): our initial birth into terrestrial existence is one type of birth, the second birth that the religions refer to is an initiation into the spiritual path. This alchemical and transformative psycho-spiritual process of dying before dying reoccurs in a myriad diverse forms and descriptions throughout the spiritual traditions, yet we can observe the myriad points of convergence.

Just how universal this transformative process is has been underscored by the philosopher Frithjof Schuon (1907–1998): 'every complete tradition postulates in the final analysis the "extinction" of the ego for the sake of the divine "I."⁹ The French metaphysician René Guénon (1886–1951) also confirms the universal nature of the doctrine of mystical death and resurrection: '[T]he idea of a "second birth", understood in a purely spiritual sense, is indeed common to all spiritual doctrines.'¹⁰ At the heart of every integral psychology or 'science of the soul' is the recognition of psycho-spiritual transformation or *metanoia*, which is inseparable from metaphysics and integral spirituality. This perennial psychology that is an application of the perennial philosophy discerns between the horizontal dimension consisting of the empirical ego, and the vertical dimension that pertains to the transpersonal

7. Rāmakrishna, *The Original Gospel of Rāmakrishna: Based on M.'s English Text, Abridged*, ed. Swāmī Abhedānanda and J. A. Fitzgerald (Bloomington IN: World Wisdom, 2011), p. 19.

8. Annemarie Schimmel, *The Triumphal Sun: A Study of the Works of Jalāloddīn Rumi* (Albany NY: SUNY Press, 1993), p. 324.

9. Frithjof Schuon, *Gnosis: Divine Wisdom: A New Translation with Selected Letters*, trans. M. Perry, J.-P. Lafouge and J. S. Cutsinger, ed. J. S. Cutsinger (Bloomington IN: World Wisdom, 2006), p. 63.

10. René Guénon, *Introduction to the Study of the Hindu Doctrines*, trans. M. Pallis (Hillsdale NY: Sophia Perennis, 2001), p. 156.

Self. The horizontal and vertical dimensions are interdependent, and are both required for the human realm and the realm of the Spirit. However, it is essential to bear in mind that the vertical dimension precedes the horizontal and that the horizontal is reliant on the vertical dimension and not the other way around. As we recall, 'To deny the spiritual is to deny the human.'¹¹ In what follows, we will explore psycho-spiritual integration and the symbolic meaning behind mystical death and resurrection, as found in the universal and timeless wisdom found around the world.

Human consciousness is always ruminating on eschatological questions about our final ends, whether we are aware of it or not. What does it mean to be born, to live, and to die? And who is it that is born, lives, and dies? These questions, although asked since time immemorial, hold as much importance today as they did in the past and remain equally perplexing because they illuminate the mystery of existence and the limits of human knowledge. Whitall N. Perry (1920–2005) writes:

There are two historical moments in the life of every person on earth which are inexorably real and yet totally outside the reach of empirical consciousness: the moment of birth, and the moment of death. These two decisive events occur moreover exactly once, over the entire lifespan of the individual, and scarcely enter into his reflections at all—everything else considered.¹²

At the intersection of the horizontal and vertical dimensions, time and the temporal are juxtaposed with the timeless and Eternal.¹³ Through metaphysics we can make sense of the strange and enigmatic logic of death and dying and its transformative process.

While birth and death occur at opposite ends of a human lifetime, they are inextricably interconnected and intersect each other. They are both fundamentally linked to the sacred and originate from this common transpersonal source. Chuang Tzu makes a thought-provoking observation about the phenomenon of birth and death,

11. Frithjof Schuon, *The Eye of the Heart: Metaphysics, Cosmology, Spiritual Life* (Bloomington IN: World Wisdom Books, 1997), p. 55.

12. Whitall N. Perry, *Challenges to a Secular Society* (Oakton VA: Foundation for Traditional Studies, 1996), pp. 129–30.

13. 'Eternity can no more enter into time than the Absolute can enter into contingency' (Frithjof Schuon, *In the Face of the Absolute* [Bloomington IN: World Wisdom Books, 1994], p. 52).

alluding to what is beyond them both: 'Birth is not a beginning; death is not an end.'¹⁴ As it has been affirmed: 'From the "point of view of eternity" birth and death are one.'¹⁵ The interconnected essence of birth and death has been recognized everywhere since the most remote past: 'Life and death, then, are considered not as two separate stages of completing mankind's temporal and post-earthly existence, but as complementary phases in an ever-recurring cycle.'¹⁶

For this reason, the well-known teacher of Zen Buddhism, Shunryu Suzuki (1904–1971), clarifies: 'Our life and death are the same thing. When we realize this fact we have no fear of death anymore, and we have no actual difficulty in our life.'¹⁷ Roshi Philip Kapleau (1912–2004) asserts a similar point: 'Living is thus dying, and dying living. In fact, with every inhalation you are being reborn and with each exhalation you are dying.'¹⁸ Seen in the light of Ultimate Reality or the Absolute, as articulated through the doctrine of non-duality, both birth and death are unreal and therefore illusory, as even these dichotomies need to be transcended. The Tibetan Buddhist tradition maintains that: 'Ultimately, there is nothing that dies, since neither self nor mind have true existence.'¹⁹ This is exemplified in the Heart Sūtra (*Prajñāpāramitā-hṛdaya-sūtra*): 'Form is emptiness; emptiness is form. Emptiness is not other than form; form is not other than emptiness.'²⁰ The mutual interconnectedness of all phenomena applies not only to the world of appearances of *samsāra*, but also to the mutuality of *samsāra* and *nirvāna* and life and death—akin to the Taoist metaphysical and cosmological concept of *yin-yang* where all dualism is nonexistent.

At the core of this psycho-spiritual transformation which provides integral health and well-being *in divinis* is not a socially adjusted ego,

14. Chapter 23; trans. Herbert A. Giles, *Chuang Tzu: Mystic, Moralist, and Social Reformer* (London: Bernard Quaritch, 1889), p. 304.

15. Lord Northbourne, *Looking Back on Progress*, ed. Christopher James 5th Lord Northbourne (Ghent NY: Sophia Perennis, 2001), p. 114.

16. Frank Waters, *Book of the Hopi: The First Revelation of the Hopi's Historical and Religious Worldview of Life* (New York: Penguin Books, 1977), p. 192.

17. Shunryu Suzuki, 'Nirvana, the Waterfall', in *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, ed. T. Dixon (New York: Weatherhill, 1995), p. 94.

18. Roshi Philip Kapleau, *Zen: Dawn in the West* (Garden City NY: Anchor Books, 1980), p. 67.

19. Jamgon Kongtrul, *The Great Path of Awakening: The Classic Guide to Using the Mahayana Buddhist Slogans to Tame the Mind and Awaken the Heart*, trans. K. McLeod (Boston: Shambhala, 2000), p. 26.

20. The Heart Sūtra, quoted in Donald S. Lopez, Jr., *The Heart Sutra Explained: Indian and Tibetan Commentaries* (Albany NY: SUNY Press, 1988), p. 57.

but rather what transcends the empirical ego itself. The secret of the Prophetic Tradition that is affirmed by Muhammad's injunction 'Die before ye die' is a call for self-effacement before the Divine in order to be reabsorbed in the Divine. The spiritual path requires detachment from worldliness and sentimentality, '[I]n order to "live" inwardly one must "die" outwardly.'²¹ By dying to the outer limitations, the human being is born into the unlimited and transpersonal dimension: '[T]he Divine requires both a ritual and moral preparation whereby the aspirant learns to "die" spiritually.'²²

Hence, it is essential to position oneself in this very life and to localize oneself in this ontological and existential context, to face one's mortality and examine one's life. Through this process, we can see and understand human existence in its most expansive and complete context:

The experience of death is rather like that of a man who has lived all his life in a dark room and suddenly finds himself transported to a mountain top; there his gaze would embrace all the wide landscape; the works of men would seem insignificant to him. It is thus that the soul torn from the earth and from the body perceives the inexhaustible diversity of things and the incommensurable abysses of the worlds which contain them; for the first time it sees itself in its universal context, in an inexorable concatenation and in a network of multitudinous and unsuspected relationships, and takes account of the fact that life has been but an 'instant', but a 'play'. Projected into the absolute nature of things, man will be inescapably aware of what he is in reality; he will know himself, ontologically and without any deforming perspective, in the light of the normative proportions of the Universe.²³

Through this ontological and existential positioning that continually keeps death in the foreground of consciousness, the attachment to the world of appearances gradually loosens its hold and gives way so that the reliance on the Divine alone can occur.

21. Frithjof Schuon, *Logic and Transcendence: A New Translation with Selected Letters*, trans. M. Perry, J.-P. Lafouge and J. S. Cutsinger, ed. J. S. Cutsinger (Bloomington IN: World Wisdom, 2009), p. 190.

22. Mark Perry, *The Mystery of Individuality: Grandeur and Delusion of the Human Condition* (Bloomington IN: World Wisdom, 2012), p. 248.

23. Frithjof Schuon, *Understanding Islam* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 1998), p. 92.

[T]hink often of death with attention, bringing to mind everything which must then happen. If you do this, that hour will not catch you unawares. . . . Men of this world flee from the thought and memory of death, so as not to interrupt the pleasures and enjoyments of their senses, which are incompatible with memory of death. This makes their attachment to the blessings of the world continually grow and strengthen more and more, since they meet nothing opposed to it. But when the time comes to part with life and all the pleasures and things they love, they are cast into excessive turmoil, terror and torment.²⁴

Every moment of our earthly sojourn is to be valued and cherished and in no way taken for granted and squandered, as behind the passing hourglass of time is the Eternal:

[I]t is very remarkable, that God who giveth plenteously to all creatures . . . hath scattered the firmament with stars . . . yet in the distribution of our time God seems to be straight-handed, and gives it to us, not as nature gives us rivers, enough to drown us, but drop by drop, minute after minute, so that we never can have two minutes together, but He takes away one when He gives us another. This should teach us to value our time; since God so values it. . . .²⁵

The phenomena of death and the afterlife have had profound metaphysical and symbolic implications amongst the many ancient and diverse civilizations and societies of the world. There are numerous sacred texts on these themes such as *Per-t Em Hru* ('The Book of Going Forth by Day'), often known as *The Book of the Dead*, from Egypt; and the *Bardo Thödol* ('Liberation Through Hearing During the Intermediate State'), often known as *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*; and also the European genre of the *ars moriendi* ('art of dying'). There are also other sacred texts both written and oral known within Hinduism, the First Peoples religions and their shamanic traditions, and in Islam. They are intended to provide guidance to human beings in their

24. *Unseen Warfare: The Spiritual Combat and Path to Paradise of Lorenzo Scupoli*, ed. Nicodemus of the Holy Mountain and revised by Theophan the Recluse, trans. E. Kadloubovsky and G. E. H. Palmer (Crestwood NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2000), p. 252.

25. Jeremy Taylor, *The Rule and Exercises of Holy Dying* (Oxford: John Henry and James Parker, 1858), p. 39.

posthumous states, in order to find their way to a better or superior ontological status in the afterlife.

These sacred texts taught the importance of learning the art of dying while we are healthy and well, and not postponing this fundamental task: 'Against his will he dieth that hath not learned to die. Learn to die and thou shalt [learn] to live, for there shall none [learn] to live that hath not learned to die.'²⁶ Or alternatively, 'My Lord, it is a great art to die well, and to be learnt by men in health. . . .'²⁷ The afterlife also has a correspondence with the here and now of the present moment, as Ultimate Reality or the Absolute is contained in all time and is never absent from the now. Thus, eschatology is twofold as it has a macrocosmic and a microcosmic dimension, the latter being mostly focused on the present moment. As the influential Muslim scholar Seyyed Hossein Nasr writes, 'From this point of view the posthumous becoming of man is no more than a continuation of the journey on this earth to another level of existence, one which, moreover, can already be undertaken here and now.'²⁸ The teachings mentioned above were not only understood to be manuals on how to prepare for death but were also seen as providing instruction on how to live one's life in the here and now. By making use of the present moment and not putting off what can be done now for the future or tomorrow, we can make changes and prepare to be at peace with both life and death.

The notion of *bardo* found in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition is useful for understanding human existence as traversing states that can be encountered in the here and now as well as after death:

'Bar' means in between, and 'do' means island or mark; a sort of landmark which stands between two things. It is rather like an island in the midst of a lake. The concept of bardo is based on the period between sanity and insanity, or the period between confusion and the confusion just about to be transformed into wisdom; and of course it could be said of the experience which stands between death and birth.²⁹

26. 'Three Fragments which Teach a Man for to Die', in *The Book of the Craft of Dying*, ed. Frances M. M. Comper (London: Longmans, Green, and Company, 1917), p. 127.

27. Taylor, *Rule and Exercises of Holy Dying*, p. vi.

28. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Sufi Essays* (Albany NY: SUNY Press, 1972), p. 47.

29. Chögyam Trungpa, 'Commentary', in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead: The Great Liberation through Hearing in the Bardo*, trans. F. Fremantle and C. Trungpa (Boston: Shambhala, 1987), pp. 10–11.

Again, the task was to live one's life according to the sacred tenets found at the heart of every revealed tradition, and by doing so to be always prepared to face death. It needs to be made clear that there is no necessary connection between Spiritual Realization and the death of the body. As we recall, 'Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it' (Ecclesiastes 12:7). Spiritual Realization can occur now in this very life, as the religions themselves demonstrate.

The most archaic forms of this mystical death and resurrection are found among the aboriginal religions. It is through the initiatory process that the consciousness of the shamanic apprentice is transfigured in such a way that a psycho-spiritual restructuring occurs. This process allows for a new ontological orientation to manifest itself, allowing a rebirth to take place. In accordance with this transformation it is affirmed, 'To be dead while alive, and alive while dead, is one of the primary feats of the primitive spiritual traveler.'³⁰ According to the Osage Indians, 'You shall have a body that is free from all causes of death.'³¹

Joseph Epes Brown (1920–2000), renowned scholar of the Native American traditions and world religions, outlines the three stages of this transformative process, which appear throughout the sapiential traditions:

All true spiritual progress involves three stages, which are not successfully experienced and left behind, but rather each in turn is realized and then integrated within the next stage, so that ultimately they become one in the individual who attains the ultimate goal. Different terms may be used for these stages, but essentially they constitute purification, perfection or expansion, and union.³²

Across the diverse religious and spiritual traditions of the world these transformative stages are present in distinct forms: 'Despite the many differences of technique and approach in various paths of spiritual realization, there is in every process of realization the three grand

30. Ptolemy Tompkins, *This Tree Grows Out of Hell: Mesoamerica and the Search for the Magical Body* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1990), p. 19.

31. Osage Indians, quoted in Brown, *The Sacred Pipe*, p. 21.

32. Joseph Epes Brown, *The Spiritual Legacy of the American Indian: Commemorative Edition with Letters While Living with Black Elk*, ed. M. B. Weatherly, E. Brown and M. O. Fitzgerald (Bloomington IN: World Wisdom, 2007), p. 34.

stages of purification, expansion, and union. Something in man must die, something must expand, and only then the essence of man is able to achieve that union.³³ If transpersonal union with Ultimate Reality or the Absolute is the final goal of all spiritual disciplines, then it is necessary that the impure not be rejoined with what is pure. For this reason, the process of purification is needed. Expansion proceeds as only that which is complete, whole or total can be reunited with the Real. In ceasing to be an imperfect fragment, an expansion occurs to include and rejoin the human being within the entire cosmos.

When we speak here of 'philosophy', we mean the ancient understanding of *philo-sophia*, or the 'love of wisdom' as a way of life and of realizing this wisdom.³⁴ Mircea Eliade (1907–1986) illustrates the relationship between the treatment of the topic of mystical death and resurrection by the aboriginal religions and its treatment by the philosophers:

The shaman is the man who *knows* and *remembers*, that is, who understands the mysteries of life and death; in short, who shares in the spirit condition. He is not solely an ecstatic but also a contemplative, a thinker. In later civilizations the philosopher will be recruited among these beings, to whom the mysteries of existence represent a passionate interest and who are drawn, by vocation, to know the inner life.³⁵

Many of the ancient philosophers identified philosophy as the function and process of consciously dying. A remarkable example of this is found in the Platonic dialogue *Phaedo* in which Socrates (c. 470–399 BC) is awaiting his execution. In the final moments of his life as recorded by Plato (427–347 BC), a dialogue takes place that focuses on the issue of death and its implications for living:

33. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred* (Albany NY: SUNY Press, 1989), p. 330. These stages are consistent with the three phases contained in the diverse rites of passage as put forward by ethnographer Arnold van Gennep: 'preliminal rites (rites of separation), liminal rites (rites of transition), and postliminal rites (rites of incorporation)' (Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, trans. M. B. Vizedom and G. L. Caffee [University of Chicago Press, 1975], p. 11).

34. See Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, trans. M. Chase, ed. A. I. Davidson (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999).

35. Mircea Eliade, *Rites and Symbols of Initiation: The Mysteries of Birth and Rebirth*, trans. W. R. Trask (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), p. 102.

It may be that the rest of mankind are not aware that those who apply themselves correctly to the pursuit of philosophy are in fact practicing nothing more nor less than dying and death. If this is so, it would indeed be strange that men who had throughout their lives sought precisely this, should grumble when it came—the very thing which they had, for so long, desired and rehearsed.³⁶

Michel de Montaigne (1533–1592) in his widely-acclaimed *Essays* wrote a treatise entitled ‘To Philosophize is to Learn how to Die’, which makes an important connection to the idea articulated above by Plato. Having stated earlier: ‘To practice death is to practice freedom. A man who has learned how to die has unlearned how to be a slave’,³⁷ Montaigne writes: ‘Death is the origin of another life’.³⁸ One can also identify a similar approach taken by the Stoic philosopher Seneca (c. 4–65) when he articulates succinctly, ‘One must spend an entire lifetime in learning how to live, and, which may surprise you more, an entire lifetime in learning how to die.’³⁹

The Lithuanian scholar Algis Uždavinys (1962–2010) explains, ‘a philosophical journey is the mimetic and ritual-like journey of the hero, like Heracles and Orpheus, to the Netherworld, the Egyptian Duat, where all the opposites meet. This is the process of “dying before death” and resurrection.’⁴⁰ He elsewhere points out that the ‘Philosophical ascent is analogous to that accomplished by the mystery-rites. And philosophy itself essentially is a rite of rebirth—“rebirth” meaning the soul’s unification with divine Intellect.’⁴¹

A key challenge that is encountered when surveying the theme of mystical death and resurrection is the fact that many of these ancient traditions held this knowledge to be esoteric and secret, and it was for the most part reserved only for the eyes and ears of those initiated, meaning only those who had been sufficiently prepared by having gone through the necessary rites were eligible to receive

36. *Phaedo*, 64A, trans. R. S. Bluck in *The Dialogues of Plato* (New York: Bantam Books, 1986), p. 72.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 24.

38. Michel de Montaigne, ‘To Philosophize is to Learn how to Die’, in *The Essays: A Selection*, trans. M. A. Screech (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), pp. 17–36 (p. 30).

39. Seneca, ‘On the Shortness of Life’, in *Dialogues and Essays*, trans. J. Davie (Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 146.

40. Algis Uždavinys, *Philosophy as a Rite of Rebirth: From Ancient Egypt to Neoplatonism* (Westbury UK: Prometheus Trust, 2008), pp. 62–3.

41. *Ibid.*, p. 254.

this knowledge. It is through the sacred rites that initiation becomes possible as an actualizing force. The word 'mystery' (*mystērion*) comes from the Greek word *mystēs*, which means 'initiate'. To access this esoteric knowledge, one needs to be first initiated into its mysteries. The guarding of this knowledge was necessary to prevent any harm from occurring. In some traditions, to allow the uninitiated access to this knowledge could subsequently lead to the profanation of its mysteries; and could, indeed, jeopardize one's life or sanity.

Many of the mystery religions and schools—such as those of ancient Egypt and Greece, especially the Eleusinian, Dionysian, and Orphic mysteries—participated in the process of initiatory death and rebirth in order to be transfigured into a divine mode of being. Enigmatic wording is used to allude to this second birth: 'I have the power to be born a second time.'⁴² One was considered extremely fortunate to be able to take part in the initiatory ceremonies of the mystery religions. It has been stated that:

The rite of initiation into the Mysteries, often referred to as a second birth, is nothing other than the grafting of this chain of spiritual succession onto the psychic substance of the new initiate, thereby replacing the profane natal heredity which must not be allowed to reassert itself.⁴³

The following lengthy passage cited by Stobaeus (fifth century), thought to be from Plutarch (c. 45–120), is important here as it underscores the transformative process that occurs when an individual participates in the mysteries, and provides a unique glimpse into this enigmatic world:

Thus we say that the soul that has passed thither is dead (*olōlenai*), having regard to its complete (*eis to holon*) change and conversion. In this world it is without knowledge, except when it is already at the point of death; but when that time comes, it has an experience like that of men who are undergoing initiation into great mysteries; and so the verbs *teleutân* (die) and *teleisthai* (be initiated), and the actions they denote, have a similarity. In the beginning there is

42. Chapter 64, *The Book of the Dead*, trans. E. A. Wallis Budge (Chicago: Open Court Publishing, 1901), p. 218.

43. Martin Lings, 'Preface', *The Underlying Religion: An Introduction to the Perennial Philosophy*, ed. M. Lings and C. Minnaar (Bloomington IN: World Wisdom, 2007), p. x.

straying and wandering, the weariness of running this way and that, and nervous journeys through darkness that reach no goal, and then immediately before the consummation every possible terror, shivering and trembling and sweating and amazement. But after this a marvelous light meets the wanderer, and open country and meadow lands welcome him; and in that place there are voices and dancing and the solemn majesty of sacred music and holy visions. And amidst these, he walks at large in new freedom, now perfect and fully initiated, celebrating the sacred rites, a garland upon his head, and converses with pure and holy men; he surveys the uninitiated, unpurified mob here on earth, the mob of living men who, herded together in mirk and deep mire, trample one another down and in their fear of death cling to their ills, since they disbelieve in the blessing of the other world. For the soul's entanglement with the body and confinement in it are against nature, as you may discern from this.⁴⁴

This passage makes a valuable connection between the verbs 'to die' and 'to be initiated'. The Platonic philosopher Lucius Apuleius (c. 124–170) describes his initiation into the Mysteries in a similar manner: 'I approached the confines of death: and having trodden on the threshold of Proserpina [Persephone] returned, having been carried through all the elements. In the depths of midnight I saw the sun glittering with a splendid light, *together with the infernal and supernal gods*: and to these divinities approaching near, I paid the tribute of devout adoration.'⁴⁵ It is through this transmutation that the human soul can be purified and restored to its original state *in divinis* as Plotinus (204–270) expresses in this passage from his essay *On Beauty*:

Therefore we must ascend again towards the Good, the desired of every Soul. Anyone that has seen This, knows what I intend when I say that it is beautiful. Even the desire of it is to be desired as a Good. To attain it is for those that will take the upward path, who will set all their forces towards it, who will divest themselves of all that we have put on in our descent: so, to those that approach the Holy Celebrations of the Mysteries, there are appointed purifications

44. Plutarch, 'Fragment 178', in *Moralia*, vol. 15: *Fragments*, trans. F. H. Sandbach (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), p. 317.

45. Apuleius, *Metamorphoses* XI.23, quoted in Thomas Taylor, *The Eleusinian and Bacchic Mysteries* (New York: J. W. Bouton, 1891), p. 102.

and the laying aside of the garments worn before, and the entry in nakedness—until, passing, on the upward way, all that is other than the God, each in the solitude of himself shall behold that solitary-dwelling Existence, the Apart, the Unmingled, the Pure, that from Which all things depend, for Which all look and live and act and know, the Source of Life and of Intellection and of Being.⁴⁶

According to Aristotle (384–322 BC), ‘those who are being initiated into the mysteries are to be expected not to learn anything but to suffer some change, to be put into a certain condition, i.e. to be fitted for some purpose.’⁴⁷

Here is a well-known account from the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* praising the mysteries: ‘Happy is he among men upon earth who has seen these mysteries; but he who is uninitiate and who has no part in them, never has lot of like good things once he is dead, down in the darkness and gloom.’⁴⁸ The ancient Greek playwright Sophocles (c. 496–406 BC) exclaims: ‘Thrice fortunate are those among mortals who have seen these rites before going to Hades; for they alone have life there, while others have every kind of misery.’⁴⁹ Further testimonies likewise signify that, as a result of having experienced the mysteries, the soul of the initiate will be content and at peace after death. For example, the orator and philosopher Cicero (106–43) asserted that the Eleusinian mysteries disclosed how ‘to live happily, but also to die with a better hope’.⁵⁰ What is important to note here is that these initiates do not appear to be referring to a physical death, but rather to the false identification with the empirical ego or separate self. This is perhaps why the utterances of the initiates of the mysteries that have been recorded by the philosophers and historians resemble the testimonies of the saints and sages of the religions.

The process of mystical death and resurrection within the world’s religions is most apparent within the mystical or esoteric dimensions of

46. *Enneads* I.VI.7, quoted in *The Heart of Plotinus: The Essential Enneads*, trans. A. Uždavinys (Bloomington IN: World Wisdom, 2009), p. 73.

47. Attributed to Aristotle by Synesius: *The Works of Aristotle*, vol. 12: *Select Fragments*, trans. Sir David Ross (Oxford University Press, 1952), p. 87.

48. *Hymn to Demeter* 480–82, in Hesiod, *The Homeric Hymns and Homeric*, ed. and trans. H. G. Evelyn-White (London: William Heinemann, 1920), p. 323.

49. Fragment 837, in *Sophocles: Fragments*, ed. and trans. H. Lloyd-Jones (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), pp. 368–9.

50. *De Legibus* II.xiv.36, in *On the Republic, On the Laws*, trans. C. W. Keys (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 415.

these traditions. For example, in Hinduism the yogi attains Deliverance (*mokṣa* or *mukti*) akin to a *death in life* and thus becomes one who is 'liberated in life' (*jīvan-mukta*), having realized the Self (*Ātman*). Śrī Nisargadatta Maharaj (1897–1981) confirms this: 'The [*jñānī*] has died before his death.'⁵¹ Paradoxically, he or she is in life and has a body, yet has no relationship to life as it is commonly understood or known, and is like a dead man or woman in life. In this transformative process, he or she dies and is reborn into a new mode of being. Ramana Maharshi in the summer of 1896, at the age of seventeen, had a spontaneous experience in which he was overwhelmed by a violent fear of death that led to the recognition that 'The body dies but the Spirit that transcends it cannot be touched by death. That means I am the deathless Spirit.'⁵²

This transformative process is also to be found in the Buddhist tradition, even though Gautama or Śakyamuni Buddha refused to discuss or answer metaphysical questions. The Buddha taught the truth of the Dharma and how to awaken to the truth of this existence. This requires a dying to the profane condition, to be restored into another mode of being. Ananda K. Coomaraswamy (1877–1947) states that 'Nirvāṇa is a kind of death, but like every death a rebirth to something other than what had been.'⁵³ Beyond the relative point of view of the Absolute, 'Buddha teaches that all beings are from all eternity ever abiding in Nirvāṇa.'⁵⁴ Kenryo Kanamatsu (1915–1986) adds, 'It is the absolute dying to the self, which is at once the absolute *rebirth* of the self in the Universal Self.'⁵⁵

In the Theravāda Buddhist tradition there is the practice of meditating on the human body, visualizing it as a corpse undergoing various stages of decay, in order to realize the three marks of existence that are three characteristics of all conditioned phenomena: impermanence (*aniccā*), unsatisfactoriness or suffering (*duḥkha*), and no-self (*anattā*). Hence, the body of the meditator and that of the corpse, as the Buddha teaches, experience one and the same fate:

51. *I Am That: Talks with Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj*, trans. M. Frydman, ed. S. S. Dikshit (Durham NC: Acorn Press, 1999), p. 139.

52. Ramana Maharshi, quoted in 'Preface', *Teachings of Ramana Maharshi*, pp. 9–10.

53. Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *Hinduism and Buddhism* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1943), p. 64.

54. Quoted in Asvaghosa, *The Awakening of Faith: The Classic Exposition of Mahayana Buddhism*, trans. Teitaro Suzuki (Mineola NY: Dover Publications, 2003), p. 74.

55. Kenryo Kanamatsu, *Naturalness: A Classic of Shin Buddhism* (Bloomington IN: World Wisdom, 2002), p. 10.

Again, bhikkus, as though he were to see a corpse thrown aside in a charnel ground, one, two, or three days dead, bloated, livid, and oozing matter . . . devoured by crows, hawks, vultures, dogs, jackals, or various kinds of worms . . . a skeleton with flesh and blood, held together with sinews . . . a skeleton without flesh and blood . . . disconnected bones scattered in all directions—here a hand-bone, there a foot-bone, here a shin-bone, there a thigh-bone, here a hip-bone, there a back-bone, here a rib-bone, there a breast-bone, here an arm-bone, there a shoulder-bone, here a neck-bone, there a jaw-bone, here a tooth, there the skull . . . bleached white, the colour of shells . . . bones heaped up . . . more than a year old, rotted and crumbled to dust, a bhikku compares this same body with it thus: ‘This body too is of the same nature, it will be like that, it is not exempt from that fate.’⁵⁶

Buddhaghosa, a fifth-century Indian Theravāda Buddhist commentator and scholar, also taught that mindfulness of death was one of the great virtues of the spiritual path.

Now when a man is truly wise,
His constant task will surely be
This recollection about death⁵⁷

The revered Zen master Dōgen (1200–1253) urges us to transcend dualistic interpretations and to realize that nothing is separate from Spiritual Realization itself: ‘Just understand that birth-and-death itself is nirvana, and you will neither hate one as being birth-and-death, nor cherish the other as being nirvana. Only then can you be free of birth-and-death.’⁵⁸ Some exponents have provocatively stated: ‘If you are really desirous of mastering Zen, it is necessary for you once to give up your life and to plunge right into the pit of death.’⁵⁹ Jitoku-Eki (d. 1083) once observed that ‘After the root of life has been eradicated,

56. Buddha, ‘*Kāyagatāsati Sutta*: Mindfulness of the Body,’ in *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, trans. Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi (Somerville MA: Wisdom Publications, 2015), p. 952.

57. Bhadantācariya Buddhaghosa, *The Path of Purification (Visuddhimagga)*, trans. Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli (Onalaska WA: BPS Pariyatti, 1999), p. 235.

58. Dōgen, quoted in *The Heart of Dōgen’s Shōbōgenzō*, trans. Norman Waddell and Masao Abe (Albany NY: SUNY Press, 2002), p. 106.

59. Yekiwo, quoted in Daisetz T. Suzuki, *Zen and Japanese Culture* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1959), p. 78.

one is reborn variously in accordance with one's intrinsic capacity.⁶⁰ Having already died to the profane condition, the rest follows: 'one thing is certain. If you understand Zen, you will not be afraid to die.'⁶¹ The renowned Tibetan scholar Tsong-Kha-Pa (1357–1419) avows that the traveler on the spiritual path needs to 'Meditate again and again [on death] until you have turned your mind away from the activities of this life, which are like adorning yourself while being led to the execution ground.'⁶²

The Zen master Hakuin (1686–1769) discusses what he has termed a 'death' *koan* in order better to understand the mystery of human existence:

If you should have the desire to study Zen under a teacher and see into your own nature, you should first investigate the word *shi* [death]. If you want to know how to investigate this word, then at all times while walking, standing, sitting, or reclining, without despising activity, without being caught up in quietude, merely investigate the koan: 'After you are dead and cremated, where has the main character gone?' . . . Among all the teachings and instructions, the word death has the most unpleasant and disgusting connotations. Yet if you once suddenly penetrate this 'death' koan, [you will find that] there is no more felicitous teaching than this instruction that serves as the key to the realm in which birth and death are transcended, where the place in which you stand is the Diamond indestructible, and where you have become a divine immortal, unaging and undying. The word death is the vital essential that the warrior must first determine for himself.⁶³

Zen Buddhism discerns the concept of the 'Great Death' as Zen scholar Masao Abe (1915–2006) explains: 'breaking through this antinomy [of life and death] is called, particularly in Zen, the "Great Death" because it is the total negation of life-and-death and is beyond a realization

60. Jitoku-Eki, quoted in Toshihiko and Toyo Izutsu, *The Theory of Beauty in the Classical Aesthetics of Japan* (Boston: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1981), p. 124.

61. 'Stingy in Teaching,' in *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones: A Collection of Zen and Pre-Zen Writings*, ed. Paul Reps (New York: Anchor Books, 1989), p. 21.

62. Tsong-Kha-Pa, 'Mindfulness of Death,' in *The Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment*, vol. 1: *Lam Rim Chen Mo* (Ithaca NY: Snow Lion, 2000), p. 160.

63. Quoted in *The Zen Master Hakuin: Selected Writings*, trans. Philip B. Yampolsky (New York: Columbia University Press, 1971), p. 219.

of death as distinguished from life.⁶⁴ Therefore what is known as the 'Great Death' is connected with the vertical domain and we could refer to transformations of the horizontal domain as a 'little death' or 'small death'. It becomes apparent that 'All change is a dying', indicating that each moment and each experience is itself a form of dying.

The leading expert on Sufism Annemarie Schimmel (1922–2003) discusses a corresponding phenomenon within Islamic spirituality:

'Die before you die', for every act of shedding off a lowly quality is a small death; every sacrifice for the sake of others is another small death whereby the individual gains new spiritual value; thus, in a series of deaths, the soul rises to immortality or to a level of spiritualization that it has never dreamed of.⁶⁵

Regarding the idea of sacrifice in this context, 'Sacrifice is like a voluntary and symbolic death within the framework of life.'⁶⁶ The perennial psychology facilitates both the 'Great Death' and 'little death', both being facets of this integral transformative process of shedding the relative and Absolute or horizontal and vertical dimensions of human identity without confusing these distinct orders.

Within the Jewish tradition, especially in its mystical dimensions such as Hasidism, great importance is placed on preparation for death, which is central to the meaning and purpose of life and human existence:

Hasid eschatology taught the Hasid the importance of dying in full possession of his consciousness. . . . Viewed in eschatological terms, the moment of death becomes the event of initiation. . . . Thus, death is the goal orientation of life, but only if death means union with the *Eyn Sof* (the Infinite One).⁶⁷

The human quest within Jewish mysticism is to reintegrate into the Divine by dying to our fragmented self and returning to God alone:

64. Masao Abe, 'Non-Being and *Mu*—the Metaphysical Nature of Negativity in the East and West', in *Zen and Western Thought*, ed. William R. LaFleur (London: Macmillan Press, 1985), p. 131.

65. *I Am Wind, You Are Fire: The Life and Work of Rumi* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1996), pp. 157–8.

66. Schuon, *The Eye of the Heart*, p. 111.

67. Zalman Meshullam Schachter-Shalomi, *Spiritual Intimacy: A Study of Counseling in Hasidism* (Northvale NJ: Jason Aronson, 1991), pp. 38, 39, 40.

For man to find again his universal and divine wholeness, immanent in the midst of 'fragments', he had to purify and spiritualize his body and his soul, by submitting them and making them accord with the supreme will and wisdom, and finally, by freeing himself from all his earthly bonds, from all his fragmentary or individual states. Henceforth, to be one with the One and again to become infinite in the infinite, a human being had to be separated from the separate and die to what is mortal, to what is finite.⁶⁸

In Christianity, we find this mystical death and resurrection in a dialogue that takes place in the Gospels between Nicodemus and Jesus:

Jesus answered and said unto him, 'Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.' Nicodemus saith unto him, 'How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter the second time into his mother's womb, and be born?' Jesus answered, 'Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Marvel not that I said unto thee, "Ye must be born again." The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit.' (John 3:3–8)

We additionally need to point out that 'the essentially initiatory character of Christianity'⁶⁹ is conferred by the sacrament of baptism.

By turning away from the things of the world the wayfarer can return to life in the Spirit: 'If ye live *after the flesh*, ye shall die; but if ye through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live' (Romans 8:13). This mystical death and resurrection is also found in the words: 'I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me' (Galatians 2:20). To be born again from above, in the Spirit, is to be recast in His image and likeness: 'Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except *a corn of wheat* fall into the ground and *die*, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit.' (John 12:24) St. John of the Cross (1542–1591) articulates this transformative

68. Leo Schaya, *The Universal Meaning of the Kabbalah*, trans. N. Pearson (Baltimore MD: Penguin Books, 1974), pp. 134–5.

69. Frithjof Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions* (Wheaton IL: Quest Books, 1993), p. 132.

process as being a 'death to one's natural self through denudation and annihilation'.⁷⁰ Similarly, St. Anthony the Great (251–356) writes: 'Death, when understood by men, is deathlessness; but, when not understood by the foolish, it is death.'⁷¹ We also recall the words of St. Simeon the New Theologian (949–1022): 'A man who has attained the final degree of perfection is dead and yet not dead, but infinitely more alive in God with Whom he lives for he no longer lives by himself.'⁷²

The great Persian Sufi martyr 'Ayn al-Quḍāt Hamadhānī (1098–1131) avows that human beings do not realize that they are not truly living and are already buried in their tombs:

Don't you realize that [corporeal] death is not real death? True death is annihilation (*fanā'*). Whoever does not realize this [real] death has no life. Do you understand what I say? I say that as long as 'you' are 'you' and caught up in your 'self', you do not really exist. When 'you' cease to be 'you' then you [truly] become yourself. Alas! What do you hear? According to us, death is that an individual die from everything except the Beloved, so that he finds life through and in the Beloved. Then you will realize, within yourself, how death occurs.⁷³

We recall the saying attributed to the Prophet, 'People are asleep, but when they die, they wake up.' Each human being is tasked with making sense of the world, which is primarily done through sense perception, and yet we assume that we perceive things as they are. How can we be confident of this? As a result of this predicament Euripides (c. 480–406 BC) puts forth a key question, 'Who knows whether living is not being dead, while being dead is living?'⁷⁴ Perhaps what is commonly

70. St. John of the Cross, 'The Ascent of Mount Carmel', in *John of the Cross: Selected Writings*, ed. Kieran Kavanaugh (Mahwah NJ: Paulist Press, 1987), p. 96.

71. St. Anthony the Great, 'On the Character of Men and on the Virtuous Life: One Hundred and Seventy Texts', in *The Philokalia: The Complete Text; Compiled by St. Nikodimos of the Holy Mountain and St. Makarios of Corinth*, vol. 1, trans. and ed. G. E. H. Palmer, P. Sherrard and K. Ware (London: Faber and Faber, 1983), p. 336.

72. St. Simeon the New Theologian, 'Practical and Theological Precepts', in *Writings from the Philokalia: On Prayer of the Heart*, trans. E. Kadloubovsky and G. E. H. Palmer (London: Faber and Faber, 1977), p. 132.

73. Leonard Lewisohn, 'In Quest of Annihilation: Imaginalization and Mystical Death in *Tamhīdāt* of 'Ayn al-Quḍāt Hamadhānī', in *The Heritage of Sufism*, vol. 1: *Classical Persian Sufism from its Origins to Rumi (700-1300)*, ed. L. Lewisohn (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1999), p. 329.

74. These words are attributed to Euripides by Plato, *Gorgias* 492E; quoted in Algis Uždavinys, *Orpheus and the Roots of Platonism* (London: Matheson Trust, 2011), p. 94.

perceived to be life is in reality death and *vice versa*. The saints and sages suggest that human existence is likened to a dream or an illusion, and that the spiritual path allows the traveler to awaken to the Real. It is through the vantage point of metaphysics that we can glean the deeper significance of the words 'And surely the Abode of the Hereafter is life indeed, if they but knew' (Qur'ān 29:64).

Within Sufi metaphysics, the terms *fanā* ('extinction' or 'annihilation') and *baqā* ('permanence' or 'subsistence') are used to describe two contrasting states or levels on the spiritual path. These two facets are exemplified in the following verses of the Qur'ān: 'Everything is perishing except His Face [or Essence]' (28:88) and 'Everything that is thereon is passing away; and there subsisteth but the Face of thy Lord, possessor of Glory and Bounty' (55:26–7). The human being can attain higher states or levels, or even full realization once the ego is reintegrated into its transpersonal source, which requires both 'annihilation' (*fanā*) and 'subsistence' (*baqā*). When the illusory nature of human identity is dissociated from the Divine Reality, it is seen for what it is, and it becomes evident that the Divine is all that exists, allowing concentration on the Real to be possible. As only the Divine exists, dying to the profane condition is essential, as Titus Burckhardt (1908–1984) explains: 'the Supreme Unity . . . is not the object of any distinctive knowledge, and . . . is therefore not accessible to the creature as such. Only God Himself knows himself in His Unity.'⁷⁵ Ibn 'Arabī (1165–1240) cites a saying by one of the early Sufis that 'annihilation' (*fanā*) is 'the annihilation of him who was not', whereas 'subsistence' (*baqā*) is 'the subsistence of Him who has always been'.⁷⁶ In the Hindu and Buddhist traditions *Nirvāna* corresponds to *fanā* and *Parinirvāna* to *fanā al-fanāi* known as 'extinction of the extinction'.

One of the great philosophers and theologians within the Islamic tradition, al-Ghazālī (d. 1111), instructs the faithful to go to sleep with the mindfulness of our ultimate ends:

When you want to go to sleep, lay out your bed pointing to Mecca, and sleep on your right side, the side on which the corpse reclines in the tomb. Sleep is the similitude of death and waking of the resurrection. . . . Remember that in like manner you will lie in the

75. Titus Burckhardt, 'Glossary and Index', in *Introduction to Sufi Doctrine*, trans. D. M. Matheson (Bloomington IN: World Wisdom, 2008), p. 103.

76. Quoted in William C. Chittick, *The Self-Disclosure of God: Principles of Ibn al-'Arabī's Cosmology* (Albany NY: SUNY Press, 1998), p. 84.

tomb, completely alone; only your works will be with you, only the effort you have made will be rewarded. . . . As you go to sleep say: 'In Thy name, Lord . . . I live and die; and with Thee, O God, do I take refuge . . .'⁷⁷

Guénon describes the necessity of initiation on the spiritual path in order to die before dying and why it is so misunderstood today.

Of course the word 'death' must here be taken in its most general sense, according to which we may say that every change of state whatsoever is at once a death and a birth, depending on whether it is considered from one side or from the other: death with respect to the antecedent state, birth with respect to the consequent state. Initiation is generally described as a 'second birth', which indeed it is; but this 'second birth' necessarily implies a death to the profane world and follows so to speak as an immediate sequel to it, since these are strictly speaking only the two faces of one and the same change of state.⁷⁸

The reality of spiritual death and rebirth in the Spirit, of *dying before dying*, is often mischaracterized or denied within contemporary psychology and the field of mental health. This is unfortunate in view of the fact that what dies in this spiritual transfiguration is the ego, and it is precisely the ego, defined as a condition of fixated self-reference, based on the illusion of the ego's own creation, that contributes to the imbalance and illness of the psyche. This is to say that we 'are or, rather, mistakenly identify ourselves with, the mutable psycho-physical tabernacles that our Self assumes'.⁷⁹ Through this spiritual death and rebirth the human being can go beyond suffering and achieve 'the peace . . . which passeth all understanding' (Philippians 4:7). This requires the primacy of the Spirit in psychology or the 'science of the soul' in order to return it to its origins *in divinis*. Coomaraswamy not only frames the need for an integral framework based on the ancient wisdom of humanity, but adds, 'In conclusion, let us emphasize again

77. Al-Ghazālī, 'Going to Sleep', in *The Faith and Practice of Al-Ghazālī*, trans. W. M. Watt (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1994), pp. 127–8.

78. René Guénon, *Perspectives on Initiation*, trans. H. D. Fohr, ed. S. D. Fohr (Ghent NY: Sophia Perennis, 2001), pp. 172–3.

79. Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *Time and Eternity* (New Delhi: Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, 1990), p. 86.

that the perennial psychology is not a science for its own sake, and can be of no use to anybody who will not practice it.⁸⁰

The themes of mystical death and resurrection as found across the religions and their mystical dimensions are enigmatic and paradoxical. While they differ in their descriptions, they at the same time point to a common ground to comprehend what is universal and timeless in the religions. The human quest is a lifelong preparation to encounter death and die. The paradox is that in order to truly live, the human being is required to die, yet this *dying before dying* is not a corporeal death; it is a fundamental relinquishing of all that we presume to know and think, our identity and relationships with all that is.

What is necessary to understand is that only when we cease to exist, when we die before dying, can the Divine be known: 'When God seems to germinate in the soul, it is in reality the soul that dies in God.'⁸¹ Through this transformative process the human being can know what it truly means to be human and live. Life is not meant to be easy; it can more often than not be trying and difficult and sometimes even unbearable, as is evidenced by the lives of the saints and sages. Yet: 'Men must endure/Their going hence, even as their coming hither./Ripeness is all.'⁸² In fact we are reminded time and time again that 'God burdens a soul only to its capacity' (Qur'ān 2:286). The preparation for death in life is itself a form of dying, allowing the reality that transcends them to become known: 'There is one great certainty in life, and this is death; whoever really understands this certainty is already dead in this life.'⁸³ We conclude with the decisive words of Angelus Silesius (1624–1677) on this psycho-spiritual transfiguration that is known in all times and places: 'Die thou before thou die, that so thou shalt not die.'⁸⁴

80. Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, 'On the Indian and Traditional Psychology, or Rather Pneumatology', in *Coomaraswamy*, vol. 2: *Selected Papers: Metaphysics*, ed. R. Lipsey (Princeton University Press, 1978), p. 378.

81. Schuon, *Gnosis: Divine Wisdom*, p. 120.

82. William Shakespeare, *King Lear* v.2.9–11.

83. Frithjof Schuon, 'The Spiritual Virtues', in *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts: A New Translation with Letters*, trans. M. Perry, J.-P. Lafouge and J. S. Cutsinger, ed. J. S. Cutsinger (Bloomington IN: World Wisdom, 2007), p. 226.

84. Angelus Silesius, *The Cherubic Wanderer*, trans. W. R. Trask (New York: Pantheon Books, 1953), p. 56.