

Drivers of the Birth & Death Process of Individuals

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If we read any bhakti text or spiritual text belonging to the Indian school of thought we notice something characteristically different from that of the western school. This can be summarized as the doctrine of “rebirth”. Semitic religions propose that every human being has only one chance to be born. This means that whatever happens during the single chance is that person’s good luck or bad luck. Life in this model is like playing the Russian roulette game and taking what it throws out. While many of us seem to find the Indian thought much more logical, our understanding more or less ends there. At the heart of the rebirth model is the fact that the death will be followed by birth again and this process may go on. Therefore the notion of rebirth appears like a mystery and a complex concept. At times we even fear to think about it in some detail.

Birth and death cycle – Our choice?

Let us assume that the birth and death process is real. If so, the first question that we may want to ask is “why would an individual want to go through this cycle repeatedly? After all it is not a fun game as we experience in a theme park, where sometimes the children go through some rides repeatedly because they enjoy it. Although there are good times in our lives, we face quite a bit of challenges on a day to day basis. We have the fear of uncertain outcomes, we may become unwell, the relationships may suffer, we may lose people close to us and favourite things and so on.

On the whole, given a choice we may perhaps come to a conclusion that undergoing this once or twice is fine, beyond that it is not worth. But as per the Indian school of thought for most of us, this is likely to repeat for thousands of cycles before it could be ended. Our wish and the reality appear to be contradictory to each other. How do we reconcile this apparent confusion? We do not exactly know how this birth and death process is caused, what drives this forward etc. Some people say it is *Bhagavad Līla*, some others may say these questions are not to be asked. However, in chapter 7 of *Bhagavad Gītā* Shri Krishna discusses this aspect and provides answers to this question.

Attachment & Aversion – An ever divergent tree of life

Shri Krishna says that all living beings (*sarva-bhūtānī*) are deluded (*saṃmohaṃ*) and get into the process of birth (*sarge yānti*) and therefore death. The moot question is “how is this delusion arising?” According to Krishna delusion is caused by the world of dualities (*dvandva-mohena*) primarily arising out of or caused by (*samutthena*) desire and aversion (*icchā-dveṣa*). The fact that desire and aversion can trigger the birth and death process is a deep concept and requires greater explanation.

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इच्छाद्वेषसमुत्थेन द्वन्द्वमोहेन भारत ।

सर्वभूतानि संमोहं सर्गे यान्ति परन्तप ॥ 7.27

*icchā-dveṣa-samutthena dvandva-mohena bhārata,
sarva-bhūtāni saṁmohaṁ sarge yānti parantapa.*

The only thing a person is absolutely sure about is the fact that once born, he/she is bound to die. The rest of the things in one's own life cannot be predicted with any certainty. Between the "womb and the tomb" lie what is called "life". If we analyse our life, we will find that we have a host of things to which we are attached. It could be having a certain type of food, owning a new brand of a cell phone, spending time with someone who is close to us etc. Attachment drives us to perform specific actions with the hope of attaining what we are attached to. There is no guarantee that what we wanted to attain will indeed be ours. However, in this process of fulfillment pertaining to things in our list of attachment, unwittingly we will end up accumulating a host of other things and further build our list of attachment and aversion.

In this journey that we perform, we will find ourselves in a state wherein we are always occupied with how to acquire happiness and constantly worrying about how to avoid misery. In the final analysis we are consumed by the reactions to our past actions and while performing new actions based on the infatuation of attraction and repulsive nature of aversion constantly increasing more and more future reactions. Another important aspect to notice is that during our journey in the duality of attachment and aversion, we will generate several other pairs of dualities, such as happy – not happy, like – does not like, positive – negative, good – bad and so on. Therefore operating in a framework of attachment – aversion duality is like growing a divergent tree that continuously branches out with new twigs, buds, leaves etc.

The Causation of the Birth & Death Cycle

As living beings die one day, this ongoing journey of pursuing things on account of going after attachment comes to an abrupt end. However, it does not imply that the attachment – aversion list is empty. On the contrary, for reasons mentioned above, it is highly likely that the list is in fact much bigger than what an individual must have started at the time of birth. It also does not mean that the list will vanish after death so that the whole journey can be brought to a grinding halt.

Unfortunately, the list does not vanish and it stays with the soul which occupied the body in that *janma*. The use of the body by the soul is like leasing a house for a certain period of time. The attachment and aversion are experiences of the soul and the soul was merely using the body as an apparatus to exhaust them. Since the list is non-empty, there is still a "pending" account with debit and credit balances to be sorted out by the soul. Therefore, the soul takes another birth armed with this residual list of attachment and aversion and this journey continues with one more opportunity available.

This is precisely the reason Krishna says that at the time of birth the living beings are deluded by the duality of attachment and aversion. The attraction and aversion list is a cumulative one from previous lifetimes as one more opportunity of birth is made use of by the soul. This is very similar to the accounting practice of a firm, closing the account at

the end of a financial year and transferring the credit and debit balances to the next financial year and carrying on with the business.

The foregoing arguments point to the fact that there is only one way to end this recursive process. The list of attachments and aversions must become empty. The sign of spiritual wisdom is that a person rises above attraction and aversion, likes and dislikes, and embraces both as manifestations of God's creation. One method to progressively prune the list is to develop devotion towards the Lord. This will work like a repulsive force for the mind to move away and release itself from the clutches of the duality of attachment and aversion.