

## Introduction

Monk to Zen Master: What happens after death, master?

Zen master: I don't know.

Monk: But you are a master!

Master: Yes, but I'm not a dead one yet.

After you die there is either something or nothing. All the possibilities – all the beliefs, fantasies, fears, imaginings and so on – of what happens to us after we die are something rather than nothing. If there really is something, won't it be amazing to find out what it is. On the other hand, if there is nothing then, by definition, you won't be there to experience it, so you won't know anything about it anyway.

That the something after death could be terrible – hell, for instance – is quite a thought. Imagine the pain in burning forever. No, don't imagine it, it's too terrible. We would prefer this something to be wonderful – a personalised heaven, for instance, designed exactly as we would want it to be, or reincarnation a step on from our current state. Yet perhaps it is better not to make this something after death into either wonderful or terrible because then we are placing a human dual view onto something – the after-life – that is beyond duality. In any case, if there is something, just think: you are dead and experiencing it. There is an after-life after all!

What of nothing, the experience of which is one of our deepest existential fears? The abyss, the chasm of 'nothingness', the bottomless pit where we lose all sense of identity, where we don't become as nothing, we are nothing. From the limited perspective of life it is most certainly awful. But think about it: you won't be thinking about it. As Andrew Marvell, the poet, commented: "The grave's a fine and private place, But none I think do there embrace."

Something or nothing? Some religions could be accused of trying to make something out of nothing. Others work hard at proving there is nothing but nothing. Either way, like all of us, they can only enter the human condition most fully by accepting that we do not know, and we will not know until we die. Like the Zen Master, we aren't dead yet. This book explores some of the possibilities in nothing and something and the probability that after we die there will be something or there will be nothing. Either way there is nothing now to stop us exploring and enjoying the journey towards our ultimate life experience... death.

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The vast majority of people who have ever lived have believed in reincarnation and the vast majority still do.<sup>3</sup> If reincarnation is true, then it might be interesting to reincarnate as a tree or an eagle or a genius. Most beliefs involving reincarnation don't give you a choice, however, except in through living a 'good' life (good defined by the precepts of each particular belief system) so increasing your odds of, if not a chosen then at least an improved lot (spiritually even if not necessarily materially.)

Almost as many people believe that after dying they might enter some kind of heaven or hell. If this is true, then it would clearly be better to go to heaven than to hell; it might be boring but at least it would be safe. But for eternity even heaven might become a little too familiar. Over the centuries the idea of going to hell has terrified millions and millions of people. To not be terrified by the idea of eternal fire

and torture would not be real. It seems to me equally unreal to imagine a loving god who would inflict something so awful upon anyone (even our worst enemies deserve better than that, don't they?)

The other most widely adopted possibility for what happens after death is that we merge with the creator or godhead, back into the universal oneness. If this is true then the most pleasure would come with the merging, assuming that we are still experiencing similar desires as in life. Once we have merged with the creator or the universe, there isn't anything left to do or, by implication, to experience, except the one thing – the bliss of oneness. There's nothing awful about this, of course, but does have some of the disadvantages of an eternal heaven.

The last great optional belief about what happens to us after we die is that nothing does; there is nothing after death at all, nothing to experience and no 'us' to experience it. As said earlier, if there isn't any you to experience it then there is certainly nothing to be frightened of and indeed, the oblivion option does mean freedom from all the pains of life, including any illnesses and disabilities that preceded death. True, but as we cannot by definition experience this option, even if it is the truth, it seems to me more interesting to explore the possibilities, and hold to a choice to believe that, whatever it is, there will be something. It is probably best, though, along the way towards death, that we don't cling onto any of the possibilities of what might happen after death. It may just surprise us!

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Death is ever present throughout life and the more we learn to face this fact the more death becomes a friend and ally, a wise advisor who encourages us to live life more fully. To make a relationship with death is to make a commitment to self-evolution and growth.

To face death confers inner strength for it brings us more authentically into the moment, into the fullness of our lives; in other words, it brings us closer to freedom. Living wisely is to prepare for dying well, not for some promise of what will happen after death but because living wisely brings its own merit. There is nothing to avoid, nothing to be attached to except the moment as it is. Just as we generate new cells in our bodies each day, in a constant process of regeneration and renewal, so collectively we are engaged in a vast and ecstatic recycling of energy. Everything changes and nothing is ever lost. Thus truly the whole is, always has been and always will be, greater than the sum of its parts. That is equally true before and after death. All particles have relative immortality and the limited lifetime of any particular combination of particles is something to be celebrated not feared. Living your life now, surrendering to what is, confers meaning on life and death through transcending all concerns about their difference. As we cannot have one without the other, life and death, twin poles of our experience, are not nor ever have been separate.

(reference notes removed)