

MY VIEW OF LIFE AND DEATH

— while tarrying in a state of life-hunger —

by the late Hideo Kishimoto

There are two possible standpoints in speaking about one's view of life and death. One concerns the problem of death for human beings in general. Putting aside for a moment what the problem is for oneself, there is a general view of life and death ; and since one is also a human being, in a broad sense, this general view also includes oneself. Such a view of life and death can be useful, because to have one's way of thinking about life and death, including one's own death, clearly in mind is important as basic knowledge in case of emergency.

There is, however, another standpoint that is more poignant and intense. It is the view of life and death in the case of one's mind being in a state of life-hunger : the view of life and death when one is in a state of complete restlessness, being tortured by an attachment to life that seems to surge up from the bottom of one's being and by the menace of death that seems to freeze even the heart. It is the view of life and death of one who frantically tries to take hold of life even at the very brink of death.

In the latter case there is an intense element which is absent in the former general viewpoint. It is an element that is totally unthinkable in the case of a man who is healthy and leading a peaceful daily life, full of self-confidence. It is the intense-ness of the desire for life that appears when a man is in a

state of life-hunger.

The desire for life is a psycho-physical force which must always be lurking deep down in one's being, but of which man ordinarily is not aware. In an emergency, however, it raises its head furiously and appears as an intense attachment to life and as an intense fear of death. When this element is added, man's view of life and death becomes so different from the general view that it has a very distinct quality of its own.

The experience of being thrown into a state of life-hunger is limited to cases in which the prospects of continuing one's existence are cut off, as when one goes to the battlefield, or when one becomes critically ill. Moreover, it is confined to cases in which the crisis continues to hang over one. Even if one is in a situation where one's life is in danger, if there is any hope at all of life continuing by overcoming the danger, one attaches more importance to that hope than anything else and relies on it. Consequently, the genuine life-hunger feeling does not arise. For it to arise the prospects of survival must be hopeless. This is the case when the death penalty has been irrevocably decided for a condemned criminal, when the date of departure for a suicide-bombing attack has been fixed, or when a patient is declared to be beyond hope of cure because of cancer. When death is imminent, and when the consciousness of utter despair has filled the mind, the mind suddenly finds itself in a state of life-hunger. It is then that attachment to life and fear of death arise in the mind with an intensity beyond description. It is a noteworthy characteristic of this experience that life-hunger does not arise unless there is complete despair of any prospect of survival.

MY VIEW OF LIFE AND DEATH

The feeling of life-hunger is very similar to the physical feeling of hunger for food. When the stomach is full, one does not feel hunger. Of course, one can speak of appetite even when one's stomach is full; but the appetite in this case is only related to such things as the good or bad taste of food. It is not an acute feeling of hunger. Only a man with an empty stomach suffers from real hunger — the kind of hunger that can never be satisfied merely by thinking of tasty food. The life-hunger feeling is precisely the same. The mind of a man who thinks he can live tomorrow, the day after tomorrow, and forever thereafter, brims over with life. He does not feel a hunger for life. Therefore, such a man is not afflicted with the desire for life resulting from a state of life-hunger, even when he reflects on the problem of death.

What is it that a man in a state of life-hunger seeks in a general view of life and death, pressing his shaking knee joints and holding out with all his strength? It is this: Is there something in such a view that provides strength for resisting the direct and fierce offensive of impending menacing death? Any way of thinking, or a combination of ideas, that do not serve this purpose are all useless.

I myself did not know this feeling of life-hunger in the beginning. It arose when I was unexpectedly confronted with the diagnosis of cancer by a foreign doctor in a foreign hospital: "Your disease is a malignant tumor; as a medical doctor I can only guarantee your life for a half-year."

Immediately upon hearing these words I was surprised to find myself in such a state of life-hunger; and since then, for nearly ten years, while fighting against the recurrence of cancer,

MY VIEW OF LIFE AND DEATH

I have personally come to know the fierceness of this feeling.

When I looked at the world through this experience, I came to know that there are many people who are in a state of life-hunger for various reasons and are trembling in agony and fear.

When one finds oneself in a state of life-hunger, one's struggle with death is no longer that of holding general ideas on the subject. Fear of death permeates all of one's physical and mental structure, even every single cell. Attachment to life makes one resist the impending death by clinging to even a piece of straw.

Of the two standpoints described above, I, for my part, take the second one. To me the threat of cancer extending over the last ten years has somewhat subsided. For the last half-year it has become possible to think that I may possibly escape dying from cancer. Therefore, the state of life-hunger that had made me like a wounded wild boar, nowadays may be said to have subsided. However, in considering here the views of life and death, I set aside all general ideas that may become useless when a man falls into a state of life-hunger. I confine my thoughts only to those problems that loom large to me who have been reduced to this state.

When one thinks of this, while in a state of life-hunger, it becomes clear that what is usually thought of vaguely as the fear of death consists, in reality, of two different factors. One is not death itself but the physical pain leading to death. The other is the fear of one's life being cut off, or the fear of death itself.

These two, although they are qualitatively entirely different,

MY VIEW OF LIFE AND DEATH

attack man almost simultaneously in terms of time. Consequently in most cases they are confused.

Acute pain that sweeps all over the body indiscriminately — high fever, vomiting, diarrhea, hemoptysis, difficulty in breathing — in most cases the human body cannot lose its life without such pains, the mere thought of which makes one shudder.

There are many naive people who lose heart because of this, and think that they are afraid of dying.

However, this is an erroneous way of thinking, similar to that of a man who is so absorbed in the height of a mountain in front of him that he does not see the truly high mountain lying behind. However severe physical pains may be, fear of one's life being cut off is a matter of far greater magnitude. Once in a state of life-hunger, man longs to survive by all means, regardless of the pain involved. Man, in this condition, always longs to live longer. Like the prostitute depicted by Gorki in "The Lodging at Night," it is man's innermost longing to say, "I want to live longer, however painful it may be."

This becomes somewhat different, however, in the case of a convict in solitary confinement, who, while thinking in the dead of night about the execution scheduled for the morrow, passes his hand over his neck. In this case, things physical become a symbol of life's extinction; the strap, soon to be wound round his neck, is the symbol of the extinction of his life.

Accordingly, fear of death is separated into physical pain accompanying death and death itself; and here I propose to focus on life's extinction as the more central problem of death.

MY VIEW OF LIFE AND DEATH

Going deeper, what does life's being snuffed out mean? That it is the end of man's physical life is certain. Breathing stops, the heart ceases to function, and the body no longer performs its normal activities. As a result the body either decays, or it is burned and disintegrates to its natural elements.

Up to this point of physical disintegration, there is agreement in everybody's way of thinking as far as the realm of modern culture is concerned.

However, what constitutes man as a living entity is not simply a physical body alone. At least, as long as a man lives, it is common sense to think that man is a spiritual (mental) being. At the present moment when one is actually living, there is an awareness of one's self — the awareness of "this my very self." So the problem boils down to what "this my very self" will become after death. To mankind, this becomes a great problem.

The problem of whether or not life will continue after death centers, after all, on this point, though it takes various forms of expression. Belief in the existence of Paradise or the Pure Land is its simplest and clearest form. Of course, what is depicted as the mode of life in Paradise or the Pure Land after death is not merely that alone. A future with a more complex and concrete sensory and emotional life is depicted, but this belongs chiefly to the premodern age. We may take it as an undoubted fact that in modern society the number of people willing to believe in such a future in its entirety has already become smaller. However, even modern people who have ceased to believe in Paradise or the Pure Land in a concrete way, do not try to simply deny the continuance of the

MY VIEW OF LIFE AND DEATH

awareness of "this my very self." There are various views. Opinion is divided on this point.

Why does it become such an issue? Because the most dreadful thing for man is the complete extinction through death of the awareness of "this my very self," which he possesses in the present. Man stands aghast when, thinking deeply about the problem of death, he becomes aware that it means the elimination of "this my very self who am conscious in the here and now." This is awful. Awful, more than anything else. Awful to the point of making one's hair stand on end. The question of whether life will continue after death depends, upon that one point. One longs to ascertain somehow that "this my very self" will be able forever to continue to have its self-substantiating awareness. This is the modern view of the next world.

But what are the prospects? When the body disintegrates after death, sensory organs and nervous systems disappear also. Even the brain cells completely disintegrate into their natural elements. Is it not rather unreasonable to try to think that the awareness of "this my very self" alone is capable of surviving after nothing is left of the physical structure?

This seems to be the point on which opinions may vary even in the modern age. To tell the truth, I cannot believe in such a thing. My reason does not permit me to adopt such a way of thinking. Even if it is a dreadful thing of a hair-raising nature, intelligence judges thus. To me it is impossible to think otherwise than that, simultaneously with death, or with the disintegration of the body, "the awareness of this my very self" will also disappear. I myself think that this "I" will, as a

MY VIEW OF LIFE AND DEATH

result of death, disappear along with my self-awareness.

To tell the truth, in my childhood I grew up in a God-fearing Christian family. I had a childish, earnest faith; but in my youth it became impossible for me to embrace faith in such a traditional personal God as is capable of performing miracles. In that sense I gave up God. At the same time, I began to disbelieve completely in the existence of Paradise or the Pure Land as an ideal world after death. Gradually I came to think that, as a result of physical death, the conscious, self-substantiating entity called "I" will dissolve both physically and spiritually. Actually it may be more accurate to say that my modern intelligence does not allow me to think otherwise.

Thus, concerning the problem of life and death, I am taking an extremely difficult position. Unexpectedly I have been in a state of life-hunger for the past ten years. The problem of death is, therefore, always very close to me even to the point of being unable to forget it day and night. Moreover, in confronting death, I do not have belief in the continuation of life after death, a most powerful weapon. I may be said to stand before death empty-handed.

When I was in good health before being attacked by cancer, I often expressed the view stated above and was criticized by conventional men of religion :

“ You can show such a bold front because you are now healthy and do not realize such a thing as death. But wait until you are actually confronted with death. Like many other people, you are bound to depend on God and die, believing in the next world.”

MY VIEW OF LIFE AND DEATH

At that time I had no ground to argue against what was said. I could not think otherwise than that, when such a situation actually arose, I might become as they said I would. But, being unexpectedly attacked by cancer and placed in a state of life-hunger, I discovered that this did not happen.

I was standing in front of death which seemed like jet-black, mighty darkness approaching me with wide-open mouth. My heart was rending with attachment to life. I thought how happy I would be if I could believe in an ideal world after death. No solution is more appropriate than that for relieving the pain involved in a state of life-hunger. If it is certain that there is also life after death, the fierce offensive of life-hunger is bound to be softened by its force.

Yet the intelligence abiding in my mind called to me sharply : “ Are you going to acquiesce in such a compromise? Isn't it a compromise born of surrender to pain? This is evidenced by your mind itself, which really does not assent to such a way of thinking.” Hearing that sharp voice from the bottom of my heart, I felt humble pride in the toughness of my intellect ; and, while being tormented by a life-hunger-condition which had no solution, I persisted in standing before death empty-handed.

But, as I recall it now, to have been able to take such a definite attitude was rather fortunate in spite of the pain. More tragic is the case where the mind is not settled definitely, suffering amid the clouds of doubt. Does Paradise exist or not ? Confronted with death, and unable to decide the matter either way, to find oneself at a loss as to how to act : in such a case,

MY VIEW OF LIFE AND DEATH

the self is split in two or even three ways. Moreover, the more serious the state of life-hunger becomes, the stronger becomes the spur to doubt, and the deeper becomes the splitting of the self. I heard recently of a highly-regarded priest who preached the doctrine of birth in the Pure Land but, when he was confronted with death, he harbored doubts as to whether the Pure Land really existed or not ; he wavered between the two ideas of the existence and non-existence of the Pure Land, and raved until he died.

In this connection my standpoint, although a very difficult one, was definitely fixed in one direction. I could push myself toward that direction with the courage born of desperation.

Repeating what I have said, I, who do not believe in the continuation of life after death, have been placed in a state of life-hunger by an unexpected attack of cancer, and have been made to stand in front of the darkness of death. To those who believe in an ideal realm like Paradise or the Pure Land, the world after death is not dark ; it is a reality. Moreover, it is a bright world. Yet to me it is jet-black darkness.

I kept staring at that hopeless darkness with a desperate feeling ; and while doing so I gradually become aware that death is not a real existence. To think of death as a real existence, is an illusion of mankind. Death is not a real existence, but a place where there is no real existence called life. This began to dawn on me.

Life and death are related to each other as light and darkness. Darkness as a natural physical phenomenon does not exist in itself. It only means the absence of light. A place without light is called darkness. To man the equivalent of

MY VIEW OF LIFE AND DEATH

light is life. The place where there is no life is felt by man to be darkness.

To understand that the darkness of death is not a real existence appears to be nothing important, but in reality it was a great discovery for me. To put it in another way, it means that what man actually has is the present life only. Man lives by repeating his daily life. This is an indisputable fact. To man life is a real existence; but what exists for man is only his actual life now. Man has life. He lives for 50 or 60 years. Every day of that life, to man, is real existence. Each and every day is precious in the same way. Even when the span of life expires and death is near, a day close to that death is as precious as a day during the period of good health. Until the day life disappears, man must live well, cherishing life. Death is not another real existence that replaces life. It simply means the disappearance of life which is real existence.

After such a way of thinking dawned on me, I began to think that the most essential thing for man is to ponder on how to live this life which he has been given in the best way possible. However close the end of that life may have come, because of disease, the importance of every day of that life to man undergoes no change. However hard and painful it may be, there is no other way for man to live to the end than to live the life that has been given him in the best way possible.

In this way, I, who stood in front of the darkness of death empty-handed, made in this very marginal (desperate) situation a big turn, and have become one to affirm life absolutely. To live a full life in the face of death has become my new starting point.

MY VIEW OF LIFE AND DEATH

Since that time I have been thinking as a human being exclusively about how I can “live this life well.” However, even while I thus live, the state of life-hunger still exists. While living well day after day, man must, at the same time, always continue to prepare his mind for death. From the standpoint of living life well, I have come to think of death as a “time of parting” with life. Effort has to be made always not to fail in mental preparedness so that the last parting will be made well.

While experiencing life-hunger, the affirmation of life is made the starting point. Having discussed the subject thus far, at last I have come to this starting point. But I must end this article. How to live well, how to meet death which is a “time of parting” — I now lay down my pen for the time being, leaving all these problems behind.

Translated with permission from the November, 1963, issue of the magazine *Risō*.