IT WAS a magnificent old tamarind tree, full of fruit, and with tender new leaves. Growing by a deep river, it was well-watered, and it gave just the right amount of shade for animals and men. There was always some kind of bustle and noise going on under it, loud talking, or a calf calling for its mother. It was beautifully proportioned, and against the blue sky its shape was splendid. It had ageless vitality. It must have witnessed many things as through countless summers it watched the river and the goings-on along its banks. It was an interesting river, wide and holy, and pilgrims came from all parts of the country to bathe in its sacred waters. There were boats on it, moving silently, with dark, square sails. When the moon rose, full and almost red, making a silvery path on the dancing waters, there would be rejoicing in the neighbouring village, and in the village across the river. On holy days the villagers came down to the water's edge, singing joyous, lilting songs. Bringing their food, with much chattering and laughter, they would bathe in the river; then they would put a garland at the foot of the great tree, and red and yellow ashes around its trunk, for it too was sacred, as all trees are. When at last the chatter and shouting had ceased, and everyone had gone home, a lamp or two would remain burning, left by some pious villager; these lamps consisted of a home-made wick in a little terra-cotta saucer of oil which the villager could ill afford. Then the tree was supreme; all things were of it: the earth, the river, the people and the stars. Presently it would withdraw into itself, to slumber till touched by the first rays of the morning sun.

Often they would bring a dead body to the edge of the river. Sweeping the ground close to the water, they would first put down heavy logs as a foundation for the pyre, and then build it up with lighter wood; and on the top they would place the body, covered with a new white cloth. The nearest relative would then put a burning torch to the pyre, and huge flames would leap up in the darkness, lighting the water and the silent faces of the mourners and friends who sat around the fire. The tree would gather some of the light, and give its peace to the dancing flames. It took several hours for the body to be consumed, but they would all sit around till there was nothing left except bright embers and little tongues of flame. In the midst of this enormous silence, a baby would suddenly begin to cry, and a new day would have begun.

He had been a fairly well-known man. He lay dying in the small house behind the wall, and the little garden, once cared for, was now neglected. He was surrounded by his wife and children, and by other near relatives. It might be some months, or even longer, before he passed away, but they were all around him, and the room was heavy with grief. As I came in he asked them all to go away, and they reluctantly left, except a little boy who was playing with some toys on the floor. When they had gone out, he waved me to a chair, and we sat for some time without saying a word, while the noises of the household and the street crowded into the room.

He spoke with difficulty.

"You know, I have thought a great deal for a number of years about living, and even more about dying, for I have had a protracted illness. Death seems such a strange thing. I have read various books dealing with this problem, but they were all rather superficial."

Aren't all conclusions superficial?

"I am not so sure. If one could arrive at certain conclusions that were deeply satisfying, they would have some significance. What's wrong with arriving at conclusions, so long as they are satisfying?"

There's nothing wrong with it, but doesn't it trace a deceptive horizon? The mind has the power to create every form of illusion, and to be caught in it seems so unnecessary and immature.

"I have lived a fairly rich life, and have followed what I thought to be my duty; but of course I am human. Anyway, that life is all over now, and here I am, a useless thing; but fortunately my mind has not yet been affected. I have read much, and I am still as eager as ever to know what happens after death. Do I continue, or is there nothing left when the body dies?"

Sir, if one may ask, why are you so concerned to know what happens after death?

"Doesn't everyone want to know?"

Probably they do; but if we don't know what living is, can we ever know what death is? Living and dying may be the same thing, and the fact that we have separated them may be the source of great sorrow.

"I am aware of what you have said about all this in your talks, but still I want to know. Won't you please tell me what happens after death? I won't repeat it to anyone."

Why are you struggling so hard to know? Why don't you allow the whole ocean of life and death to be, without poking a finger into it?

"I don't want to die," he said, his hand holding my wrist. "I have always been afraid of death; and though I have tried to console myself with rationalizations and beliefs, they have only acted as a thin veneer over this deep agony of fear. All my reading about death has been an effort to escape from this fear, to find a way out of it, and it is for the same reason that I am begging to know now."

Will any escape free the mind from fear? Does not the very act of escaping breed fear?

"But you can tell me, and what you say will be true. This truth will liberate me . . ."

We sat silently for a while. Presently he spoke again.

"That silence was more healing than all my anxious questioning. I wish I could remain in it and quietly pass away, but my mind won't let me. My mind has become the hunter as well as the hunted; I am tortured. I have acute physical pain, but it's nothing compared to what's going on in my mind. Is there an identified continuity after death? This 'me' which has enjoyed, suffered, known—will it continue?"

What is this 'me' that your mind clings to, and that you want to be continued? Please don't answer, but quietly listen, will you? The 'me' exists only through identification with property, with a name, with the family, with failures and successes, with all the things you have been and want to be. You are that with which you have identified yourself; you are made up of all that, and without it, you are not. It is this identification with people, property and ideas, that you want to be continued, even beyond death; and is it a living thing? Or is it just a mass of contradictory desires, pursuits, fulfilments and frustrations, with sorrow outweighing joy?

"It may be what you suggest, but it's better than not knowing anything at all."

Better the known than the unknown, is that it? But the known is so small, so petty, so confining. The known is sorrow, and yet you crave for its continuance.

"Think of me, be compassionate, don't be so unyielding. If only I knew, I could die happily."

Sir, don't struggle so hard to know. When all effort to know ceases, then there is something which the mind has not put together. The unknown is greater than the known; the known is but as a barque on the ocean of the unknown. Let all things go and be.

His wife came in just then to give him something to drink, and the child got up and ran out of the room without looking at us. He told his wife to close the door as she went out, and not to let the boy come in again.

"I am not worried about my family; their future is cared for. It's with my own future that I am concerned. I know in my heart that what you say is true, but my mind is like a galloping horse without a rider. Will you help me, or am I beyond all help?"

Truth is a strange thing; the more you pursue it, the more it will elude you. You cannot capture it by any means, however subtle and cunning; you cannot hold it in the net of your thought. Do realize this, and let everything go. On the journey of life and death, you must walk alone; on this journey there can be no taking of comfort in knowledge, in experience, in memories. The mind must be purged of all the things it has gathered in its urge to be secure; its gods and virtues must be given back to the society that bred them. There must be complete, uncontaminated aloneness.

"My days are numbered, my breath is short, and you are asking a very hard thing: that I die without knowing what death is. But I am well instructed. Let be my life, and may there be a blessing upon it."