THE RIVER WAS very wide here, almost a mile, and very deep; in mid-stream the waters were clear and blue, but towards the banks they were sullied, dirty and sluggish. The sun was setting behind the huge, sprawling city up the river; the smoke and the dust of the town were giving marvellous colours to the setting sun, which were reflected on the wide, dancing waters. It was a lovely evening and every blade of grass, the trees and the chattering birds, were caught in timeless beauty. Nothing was separate, broken up. The noise of a train rattling over the distant bridge was part of this complete stillness. Not far away a fisherman was singing. There were wide, cultivated strips along both banks, and during the day the green, luscious fields were smiling and inviting; but now they were dark, silent and withdrawn. On this side of the river there was a large, uncultivated space where the children of the village flew their kites and romped about in noisy enjoyment, and where the nets of the fishermen were spread out to dry. They had their primitive boats anchored there.

The village was just above, higher up the bank, and generally they had singing, dancing, or some other noisy affair going on up there; but this evening, though they were all out of their huts and sitting about, the villagers were quiet and strangely thoughtful. A group of them were coming down the steep bank, carrying on a bamboo litter a dead body covered with white cloth. They passed by and I followed. Going to the river's edge, they put down the litter almost touching the water. They had brought with them fast-burning wood and heavy logs, and making of these a pyre they laid the body on it, sprinkling it with water

from the river and covering it with more wood and hay. A very young man lit the pyre. There were about twenty of us, and we all gathered around. There were no women present, and the men sat on their haunches, wrapped in their white cloth, completely still. The fire was getting intensely hot, and we had to move back. A charred black leg rose out of the fire and was pushed back with a long stick; it wouldn't stay, and a heavy log was thrown on it. The bright yellow flames were reflected on the dark water, and so were the stars. The slight breeze had died down with the setting of the sun. Except for the crackling of the fire, everything was very still. Death was there, burning. Amidst all those motionless people and the living flames there was infinite space, a measureless distance, a vast aloneness. It was not something apart, separate and divided from life. The beginning was there and ever the beginning.

Presently the skull was broken and the villagers began to leave. The last one to go must have been a relative; he folded his hands, saluted, and slowly went up the bank. There was very little left now; the towering flames were quiet, and only glowing embers remained. The few bones that did not burn would be thrown into the river tomorrow morning. The immensity of death, the immediacy of it, and how near! With the burning away of that body, one also died. There was complete aloneness and yet not apartness, aloneness but not isolation. Isolation is of the mind but not of death.

Well advanced in age, with quiet manners and dignity, he had clear eyes and a quick smile. It was cold in the room and he was wrapped in a warm shawl. Speaking in English, for he had been educated abroad, he explained that he had retired from governmental work and had plenty of time on his hands. He had studied various religions and philosophies, he said, but had not come this long way to discuss such matters.

The early morning sun was on the river and the waters were sparkling like thousands of jewels. There was a small golden-green bird on the veranda sunning itself, safe and quiet.

"What I have really come for," he continued, "is to ask about

or perhaps to discuss the thing that most disturbs me: death. I have read the *Tibetan Book of the Dead,* and am familiar with what our own books say on the subject. The Christian and Islamic suggestions concerning death are much too superficial. I have talked to various religious teachers here and abroad, but to me at least all their theories appear to be very unsatisfactory. I have thought a great deal about the subject and have often meditated upon it, but I don't seem to get any further. A friend of mine who heard you recently told me something of what you were saying, so I have come. To me the problem is not only the fear of death, the fear of not being, but also what happens after death. This has been a problem for man throughout the ages, and no one appears to have solved it. What do you say?"

Let us first dispose of the urge to escape from the fact of death through some form of belief, such as reincarnation or resurrection, or through easy rationalization. The mind is so eager to find a reasonable explanation of death, or a satisfying answer to this problem, that it easily slips into some kind of illusion. Of this, one has to be extremely watchful.

"But isn't that one of our greatest difficulties? We crave for some kind of assurance, especially from those whom we consider to have knowledge or experience in this matter; and when we can't find such an assurance we bring into being, out of despair and hope, our own comforting beliefs and theories. So belief, the most outrageous or the most reasonable, becomes a necessity."

However gratifying an escape may be, it does not in any way bring understanding of the problem. That very flight is the cause of fear. Fear comes in the movement away from the fact, the what *is.* Belief, however comforting, has in it the seed of fear. One shuts oneself off from the fact of death because one doesn't want to look at it, and beliefs and theories offer an easy way out. So if the mind is to discover the extraordinary significance of death it must discard, easily, without resistance, the craving for some hopeful comfort. This is fairly obvious, don't you think?

"Aren't you asking too much? To understand death we must be in despair; isn't that what you are saying?"

Not at all, sir. Is there despair when there is not that state which we call hope? Why should we always think in opposites? Is hope the opposite of despair? If it is, then that hope holds within it the seed of despair, and such hope is tinged with fear. If there is to be understanding, is it not necessary to be free of the opposites? The state of the mind is of the greatest importance. The activities of despair and hope prevent the understanding or the experiencing of death. The movement of the opposites must cease. The mind must approach the problem of death with a totally new awareness in which the familiar, the recognizing process, is absent.

"I am afraid I don't quite understand that statement. I think I vaguely grasp the significance of the mind's being free from the opposites. Though it is an enormously difficult task, I think I see the necessity of it. But what it means to be free from the recognizing process altogether eludes me."

Recognition is the process of the known, it is the outcome of the past. The mind is frightened of that with which it is not familiar. If you knew death, there would be no fear of it, no need for elaborate explanations. But you cannot know death, it is something totally new, never experienced before. What is experienced becomes the known, the past, and it is from this past, from this known that recognition takes place. As long as there is this movement from the past, the new cannot be.

"Yes, yes, I am beginning to feel that, sir."

What we are talking over together is not something to be thought about later, but to be directly experienced as we go along. This experience cannot be stored up, for if it is, it becomes memory, and memory, the way of recognition, blocks the new, the unknown. Death is the unknown. The problem is not what death is and what happens thereafter, but for the mind to cleanse itself of the past, of the known. Then the living mind can enter the abode of death, it can meet death, the unknown.

"Are you suggesting that one can know death while still alive?"

Accident, disease and old age bring death, but under these circumstances it is not possible to be fully conscious. There is

pain, hope or despair, the fear of isolation, and the mind, the self, is consciously or unconsciously battling against death, the inevitable. With fearful resistance against death, we pass away. But is it possible—without resistance, without morbidity, without a sadistic or suicidal urge, and while fully alive, mentally vigorous—to enter the house of death? This is possible only when the mind dies to the known, to the self. So our problem is not death, but for the mind to free itself from the centuries of gathered psychological experience, from ever-mounting memory, the strengthening and refining of the self.

"But how is this to be done? How can the mind free itself from its own bondages? It seems to me that either an outside agency is necessary, or else the higher and nobler part of the mind must intervene to purify the mind of the past."

This is quite a complex issue, is it not? The outside agency may be environmental influence, or it may be something beyond the boundaries of the mind. If the outside agency is environmental influence, it is that very influence, with its traditions, beliefs and cultures, that has held the mind in bondage. If the outside agency is something beyond the mind, then thought in any form cannot touch it. Thought is the outcome of time; thought is anchored to the past, it can never be free from the past. If thought frees itself from the past, it ceases to be thought. To speculate upon what is beyond the mind is utterly vain. For the intervention of that which is beyond thought, thought which is the self must cease. Mind must be without any movement, it must be still with the stillness of no motive. Mind cannot invite it. The mind may and does divide its own field of activities as noble and ignoble, desirable and undesirable, higher and lower, but all such divisions and subdivisions are within the boundaries of the mind itself; so any movement of the mind, in any direction, is the reaction of the past, of the 'me', of time. This truth is the only liberating factor, and he who does not perceive this truth will ever be in bondage, do what he may; his penances, vows, disciplines, sacrifices may have sociological and comforting significance, but they have no value in relation to truth.

We're going to find out, together, what death means. What is it that dies? This is a complex question. People have written volumes about it. One has to put aside everything other people have said. That's the first truth. One has to find out for oneself, absolutely, otherwise you live always in the shadow of fear. The organism grows old, grows unnecessarily decrepit, senile, has many diseases, because we have abused the organism. The organism is mechanical, is a machine and we have misused it. And, naturally, it dies. We know that. That isn't what is causing deep fear, there is something else. We are afraid not only of the unknown, but also afraid of letting go the known. Letting go your furniture, you know, actually your furniture which you have cherished, which you have polished every day. You have bought it and given so much attention to the beastly thing, however beautiful it is, and you're part of that furniture. You are the furniture. Do observe it, you're part of that house, which you have bought through so much difficulty. You've identified yourself with a particular community, with a particular family; so, you are the community, you are the family, you are the book, whether that book is the red book of China or the black book or the red book of some other country. You are what you have identified yourself with, whether it is the image that you have identified yourself with, or the image which you have built about yourself. You're that, and you're also this terrible confusion, mess, misery, torture of living. You're all that. All that is the word and the memory of association, association which has its memories.

This is a fact. It is not what you and I wish, but it is so. Then we see the impermanency of the furniture, the impermanency of ourselves, so thought begins to invent the

soul, as the permanent. The Hindus have done this beautifully. They've had time, 10,000 or 5,000 years, so they have invented this extraordinary structure; the higher self, the Atman, the ultimate and the physical. Gradually through birth after birth, reincarnation, all the rest of it, you'll ultimately reach whatever that is you're going to reach. You have also, in the Christian world, this whole idea of resurrection; only it's not so complicated. The Hindus have a very cunning mind and they have invented extraordinary things, but the Christian mind is a little more unsophisticated. They accept so easily. They're as superstitious as anybody else. So, you're all that. That's an absolute, psychological fact. That is what is.

You say to yourself, when I die I hope something of me will continue. What is this me that, according to the whole Asiatic world believing in reincarnation, is to be reborn again? What is that thing that you call the 'me' which is the permanent, which is going to be reborn . . . you follow? . . . if you believe in that. What is that 'me'? What are you? If you look at yourself, what are you? Not only the physical appearance, the few clothes and the house and all the rest of it. What are you, actually, inwardly? Unless you look and not be afraid to discover what you are, you'll avoid this question very cleverly. What are you? You are a series of memories, experiences, knowledge that you have acquired, a conditioned mind that is shaped according to the particular culture in which it is born. If you were born in the Communist world you don't believe in God; that, they say, is silly, bourgeois. If you were born in the Western world, brought up in the particular culture, you believe, which is the same as being conditioned in the Communist world where you do not believe. You are the result of your culture, of your conditioning. That's a fact also. Don't escape from this. You say you also have looked at it and you say there must be something much more fundamental;

much more permanent, real, which will, when we die, perhaps continue.

You have lived an unfortunate life, not really beautiful, rather shoddy, superficial, joined this and that cult, believed in this or that; lived a superficial life and when the inevitable comes, off you go. If you really want to find out while living, living, not diseased, not neurotic, actually to find out what it means to die you have to ask this question. The question is: Is there anything permanent in you? Or, is the you a series of bundles of memories with all its associations? To believe in reincarnation; in that is involved something that is going to be reborn next life, something that you, now have which is not transient, which is going to take shape again on earth. When you believe in reincarnation, you believe you are going to be better next life; that is, if you are a poor, unfortunate person, next life you'll be the most beautiful person. If you believe that, then what you do matters infinitely, because what you do now is going to shape your future. Those people who believe in reincarnation don't care a pin what happens now, what they do now. They gossip, they butcher, they are violent, they are ugly, superficial, stupid, and yet they believe. When you are concerned with right conduct which is righteousness, when you are behaving totally, completely rightly, then it doesn't matter where you are, whether you are born next life or you die.

This is not only physical, obviously, but also psychological, the dying to all things that you have cherished including the piece of furniture, and furniture I'm afraid does play a tremendous part in our life. Eventually you're going to die to the furniture so find out if you can die to your furniture now; not to be attached to anything. Not to be attached doesn't mean indifference, it doesn't mean callousness; on the contrary, when you are not attached you have tremendous vitality. There is tremendous passion,

there is great energy and that energy, then, can act totally. Is it possible to die every day to everything, to your image, to your memories, to your various dogmas, beliefs, hopes, fears? Die to everything, so that your mind is fresh, young, innocent?

The word innocence means not to hurt, not to have the capacity to hurt or be hurt. Can your mind find a way of living where it is never hurt. Not by resistance, not through isolation, but by dying to all identification, to all attachment, dependency, inwardly, because inevitably that's what is going to happen. When death comes you're either diseased, 'ga-ga' or unconscious. Whereas now, having full vitality, not neurotic, but sane, balanced, capable of reason, with energy; to die to all these things that one has accumulated in oneself. Otherwise there is no freedom. Dying every day is to love. One cannot love if there is no freedom. There is no freedom if there is the 'me' which is the accumulation, the images, the movement of identification and detachment; that 'me' prevents love. One has to die every day to know what love is. Then you'll bring a different kind of world into being.

Would you like to ask any questions about all that we have talked this afternoon?