

Article by Bernhard Spirkl, (published in German in *Visionen*, June 2003)

CARING FOR THE SOULS OF THE DEAD

In many far-Eastern countries it is quite natural for people to think of their ancestors regularly and to honour them with small offerings. In some South American countries, for example, on the Sunday before Advent, known as the Day of the Dead, the cemetery is brightly lit like a fairground: it is filled with life with everybody enjoying eating and drinking at the grave of their dead relatives. In these countries the knowledge of life after death and the way the dead affect further generations has never been lost; they know that it is important to be grateful to their ancestors and pay them respect; they know how all souls are connected, even beyond death – a knowledge that we Western Europeans have, it seems, long forgotten

What awaits us after death? Apparently there are as many answers to this question as there are people and cultures. Yet if we pay closer attention to the religious traditions, it becomes clear that the basic ideas are not so widely different. Particularly in the esoteric streams of the great religions, there is surprisingly similar evidence about life after death and the further path of the soul beyond. Within the great religions and their culture it was above all the shamans, the seers and the mystics, that is to say those who were in a position of direct awareness of the soul and spiritual worlds, who could follow the stages of the journey of the soul after death. They knew quite precisely about the interaction of the living and the dead, they knew the laws of cause and effect and the mysteries of reincarnation and rebirth.

With this knowledge the shamans, seers and mystics created various rituals and ceremonies, which were meant to regulate the community of the living and the dead. Usually these involved sacrificial ceremonies in which the living honoured their dead ancestors. The idea that the dead escort those left behind further on their path in the world and protect them is also native to many cultures, but it is not always an easy connection, as the dead can also hinder the progress of the living.

THE STAGE OF PURIFICATION

According to the evidence of spiritual teachers we can consider our embodiment on earth as a struggle of the soul with the difficulties of being in a body and dealing with the turns of fate, and the main purpose of this struggle is that we mature to higher ideals and goals. The physical life, with its many attachments to matter and the many obstacles which fate wisely chooses to send our way, serves to strengthen us in this purpose. The obstacles to a certain extent provide resistances which we have to overcome. You could say that they actually help us grow.

We ourselves can decide whether we use our lives to refine our lower qualities into higher ones, whether we develop virtues like empathy, compassion and love, or whether we give in to our more basic thirst for power, pleasure and reputation.

The potential for the soul is fundamentally different after death. Spiritual teacher Heinz Grill describes what happens after death in the following way:

“After death, after leaving physical existence, the dead can no longer choose their lives freely. Their paths are determined, they are governed by a law. Here on earth is a time of freedom. It is perhaps not a limitless freedom, but it still leaves us much room for possibility. However the actions which we neglected in life, we can no longer make up after death. It is the body which enables us to act and which, within the state of being bound to the earth, makes us capable of free steps and individually chosen decisions.....”

It seems from this perspective that after death we are on the one hand freed from the burden of the body, but on the other that we then lack the potential for further development. The continuing journey of the soul is subsequently shaped more by experiencing the effect on our souls of all the thoughts, feelings and actions that we had and gave out during our previous life on earth. In a

kind of complete reversal of the course of life, all stirrings of the soul, everything that we thought, felt and wanted in our lives on earth comes towards us again, and we experience it all in a very intense way. Depending on how we led our lives, we either connect happily with the souls of other people, or we have the experience of deprivation, isolation and pain in our soul. The duration of this “reversal”, which is also described as a journey through the spheres of the planets and which is usually a process of purification of the soul, still depends a great deal on the bereaved and their relationship to the dead, as we will see. Whereas many souls who strived for and reached greater moral perfection of character during their lives “shine” on us in a positive and inspiring way once dead, the dead who did not take on this responsibility, in their lives, or only accomplished it imperfectly, need our attention and soul-care all the more.

DIALOGUE WITH THE DEAD

When nowadays after the death of a close relative or friend we intuitively sense their presence further and perhaps even in an unaware moment start to speak to them directly out loud, we could consider this as a faint echo of a previous era, when people were much more aware of the presence of their ancestors. If we investigate the testimonies of ancient cultures, we sense more closely how they have a natural connection between this world and one beyond. The dead were not actually seen as “dead” but as “passed over” into another realm, to which there was no physical access, only the potential for communication with the soul. For us nowadays, particularly after the death of someone close to us, the question is what can we actually still do for our dead.

How intensely the connection to a dead person can be maintained after they are deceased depends to a certain extent on how strong the soul-relationship already was during life. And even after death a stronger connection can again be made. A number of bereaved people experience that after the first phase of mourning is over a completely new level of communication and inner relationship to the soul of the dead person becomes possible. Especially if our thoughts and feelings flow quite naturally and repeatedly over to the dead person, especially if they are directly addressed again and again as if presence, a kind of trust and closeness can develop between the living and the dead, which might perhaps not have been possible during life together on earth.

AN EXERCISE

So simply try the following (which it must be emphasised is not an exercise to try and get the dead to speak through you like a medium):

Sit down and imagine a person whom you knew well and who has died recently or sometime during the last decade. It is best if you remember a pleasant experience you had in common and let this experience come to mind as clearly as possible. As you think of your dead friend or relative imagine quite precisely their speech, movements and mood in the situation you have chosen. Develop an awareness that is practical, clear and specific. Longings and heartfelt feelings would make such an exercise unnecessarily difficult.

Pay attention to your own feelings. The dead person should feel attracted by your loving thoughts, and with some sensitivity you will notice very quickly whether an inner contact develops. If you have the impression that the soul of the dead person has come somewhat closer through your thoughtful activity, don't be shy about directly addressing the dead person, like this: “Can you still remember how we went swimming in the lake that time...” Just by speaking out loud you notice whether someone is already present or not. If you have the feeling that a proper connection isn't possible yet, repeat the attempt now and again over a three day period. Sometimes such an activity needs fine-tuning and repetition.

The purpose of such an exercise is that the dead person can be more clearly sensed by our own sensitive perception, or better expressed, the dead person in his constant, silent presence has the sense of being “noticed” again more in his own perception-life.

THE DEAD ARE WITH US

If we follow the descriptions of various initiates, the dead experience such remembrance as unbelievably valuable and supportive for their souls. Often their path is not easy to manage through the different stages of purification and they are marked by strong feelings of isolation. The exercise described above can strengthen our basic awareness of the necessity of caring for the souls of others, so that the dead do not remain far removed from us in the world beyond, as is often believed, but come closer to us than they were during their days on earth.

We could well say without exaggeration that we live on in our dead family, friends and acquaintances and the dead similarly so in us. Our thoughts, actions and above all our feelings and moods are marked in many different ways by the influence of our dead friends and relatives. Heinz Grill describes how the dead to a certain extent look with fear on the bereaved. This fear occurs above all because the dead, as described above, can no longer transform and develop themselves, through their own activity as they could on earth. Things they omitted to do and tasks that were left incomplete often need to be worked through and accomplished by those left behind. The dead are afraid that they might not be noticed and their fear affects those associated with them, so that the latter feel compelled to work through the legacy handed to them by following their own steps of development.

Alternative practitioners and doctors assert that in many cases an illness manifests in a patient after a close relative or friend has died. Often these symptoms – usually they are different forms of anxiety and depression – are similar to those that the deceased person might have had when alive. We live during our lives on earth within a field of relationship to the most varied people, to the living and to the dead. On a soul-plane we are never separated from this network of relationships and must often carry the soul-burdens of other people. Particularly if we want to follow a path of spiritual development, we have not only our own personal “karma” to master, but we will also be confronted by the karmic burdens of those connected with us.

But this thought should not only be seen in its negative sense. It is much more important that a stronger consciousness of the “connectedness” of the living and the dead, between this world and the world beyond, strengthens our awareness that we as people are ultimately always connected in our paths of destiny.

SACRIFICE FOR THE DEAD

In earlier times sacrifice was made to the dead. This was meant to make the journey easier for the deceased. In our contemporary time and the stage to which our souls have developed, it seems more important to replace the outer sacrifice, like the bringing of food or the burning of candles, both of which still continue as practices nowadays, with an inner activity. The dead take part in the life of our souls. As a result they will also feel relieved and liberated by everything that expands our own souls and illuminates them.

Our reading of spiritual texts with patience and loving repetition becomes like nourishment for them. Even if the dead concerned had no interest in such texts during their lives, they will now take part with the greatest interest through the consciousness of the bereaved. Such reading should also be prepared for by creating a relationship to the soul of the dead person before hand: while reading we behave as if the dead person were present and dedicate the reading to him or her to a certain extent. The crucial thing is how deeply we ourselves are able to penetrate into the deeper mysteries of the particular text and it is also important that we do not repeat the thoughts merely mechanically, but try to decipher the spiritual messages with deep sensitivity and understanding.

We can let the dead take part in everything that we do in life, by building a connection to their souls and by nourishing the connection. The more we make an effort to live life, as Goethe did, in the sense of a soul and spiritual training, striving for new insights and never being content to stop

with what we have achieved, the more the dead who take part in our development can receive this sacrifice from us.

Although the laws of the after-life are individually very complex, we can in short say that if we focus in our lives on the need to develop and nourish our souls and so learn to overcome our old, psychological patterns and well-established soul-structures, if we commit ourselves to developing a life that we ourselves form in a conscious way and take on board responsibly, this has a liberating effect on the world beyond and so on all souls who fear for their development. Denying transformation and holding on to our patterns, securities and convictions on the other hand, binds the dead and in turn lengthens their journey of purification through the worlds beyond. (End)

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(see yoga workshop)

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RECOMMENDED READING:

Heinz Grill: Caring for the souls of the dead. NEW, just published translation (see yoga books)

OOPS REGINA WE NEED TO ADD THIS IN UNDER BOOKS??

Rudolf Steiner: Life after death

Rudolf Steiner: Death the other side of life

Caring for the Souls of the Dead can be ordered from

www.lammers-koll-verlag.de

For Rudolf Steiner books see links [CLICK TO SKYLARK BOOKS](#)