

Dying, decoded

Workshops that help participants overcome their own fear of death and get over the grief of a loved one's loss are picking up pace

Dr Amitava Mookherjee is a Kolkata-based eye surgeon who has dabbled in various alternative therapies like past life regression and neuro linguistic programming which, he says, helped him experience different forms of healing. A few months back, he extended his repertoire of alternative experiences to include a workshop on death and dying. Mookherjee flew down to Delhi to participate in the two-day workshop that had a cross section of people — from corporate executives to scientists to even actors — attending. Some sought answers on what happens to us after death; some wanted to know how to cope with the death of a loved one. Mookherjee says that on his part, he wanted to understand the concept of death. “In the course of the various sessions, I came to experience the reality that the opposite of death is birth, not life. Life is continuous and death is just one of the phases. Experiencing this realization gives you an entirely different perspective on living which can be liberating.”

Discussions on death in India are often taboo and workshops on the subject still rare. But many people want to explore this inevitable phase of life, understand, and deal with it better. Gurpreet Singh, a shaman healer and teacher who conducted the Delhi workshop says that he was quite surprised at the number of people who

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Amitava Mookherjee | EYE SURGEON

showed up. “Initially, when the idea came into my mind, I wasn’t sure about the response. But as it took shape, many said they wanted to participate.”

During the two days of the workshop, Singh used shamanic techniques to help participants understand the role and importance of death in the cosmic game plan and get acquainted with post death landscapes. “Death is often the biggest crisis a person faces — whether it is his own or his loved one’s. It is important to equip oneself with the right knowledge to handle it,” he says.

A basic exposure to shamanism was a prerequisite to attending the workshop.



LOOKING BEYOND Participants at the workshop conducted by shaman Gurpreet Singh

Singh says it was essential since the practical sessions involved using shamanic journeying methods to explore and understand after-death landscapes to get over the fear of dying as well as similar methods to see one’s own death moment. Scary as it may sound, Irawati Harshe, a Mumbai-based TV actress, says she enjoyed every bit of it. “I didn’t know what to expect but found the whole experience fascinating. I realised that ultimately death teaches you detachment — and perhaps the most crucial lesson of all: how to live in the present moment.”

An important feature of these workshops involves dealing with grief. Maneesha James, a longtime disciple of Osho who is conducting a workshop titled ‘Doing Dying Differently’ in February next year in Pune says that “the training in the workshops provides a safe and supportive environment in which the pain of grief can be identified, accepted and consciously experienced.”

Some workshops even use death as a means to trigger a person’s search for enlightenment. Jacqueline Maria Longstaff, a Danish lady who spends a lot of time in India, recently conducted the ‘Dying for truth’ workshop in Bangalore where the focus was on using the death

process constructively to “awaken one’s true nature while still alive.”

But for the most part, the workshops are a way of confronting one’s own fear of death. Archa Kate Robinson, who has been conducting death and dying workshops for the past 15 years says her focus is on making the participants become ‘more friendly with death.’ “We incorporate a number of processes to do that,” she says. “For instance, in one process, the participants imagine lying on their funeral pyre and ‘watching’ from outside their bodies slowly burn. This is such an amazing experience for many people that they come out of it saying things like ‘Yip-pee I am not my body!’”

This conscious approach to dying, says James, is being embraced by a number of people who are in the process, getting rid of the biggest fear known to man. “We all know we are going to die; we are living with the inescapable. For many people, that notion itself is fraught with fear. Isn’t it, then, intelligent to face the inevitable, to confront those fears while one is still physically and psychologically able to? In doing so we might find that beyond the fear is the most amazing experience imaginable.”

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