



THE FINAL EXAM

BY SWAMI KRIYANANDA

The most important moment of life is in a very true sense its last moment. For death is when we take our final exam. The thought uppermost in the mind at that time will determine whether our future takes us upward, or sideways, or downward: upward, toward greater spiritual clarity and freedom; sideways, toward further involvement in desires and worldly attachments; or (the least fortunate) downward, toward greater darkness, confusion, and ignorance. The Bhagavad Gita, India's best-loved scripture, says that if our last thought is of God, it is to Him we will go; if that thought is of family and relatives, it is to them we will go; if the last, lingering thought in the mind is of regret for the mistakes we have made in this life, our direction will be downward toward a lessened ability to pass similar tests in the future; and, finally, if that thought is of *attraction* to those mistakes, our downward motion will be farther and more rapid.

"Those who worship the lower gods go to their gods," says the Bhagavad Gita. "Those who worship Me come to Me." This is one of the most important statements in that great and timeless scripture.

Although as we approach the end of life is the time when we should make a special effort to prepare ourselves for life's final exam, we should remind ourselves throughout life of the impermanence of everything on earth. Someday, whether late or soon, we must all confront that moment. Instead of dreading the inevitable, wouldn't it be wiser to accept its inevitability? We should embrace it, then, with an attitude -- one that we should hold throughout life -- of affirming, "What comes of itself, let it come; and let it come *whenever* it comes."

Foolish indeed is the one who lays up for himself treasures here on earth. Money, savings and checking accounts; home; cherished possessions; family members both near and distant; the reputation, and even the fame, for which we may have labored so assiduously; the pleasures and delights of the senses; the fond attachments to things and to people; the familiar scenes and localities; the parties and the good times; the neighbors and acquaintances, near to us and distant; the skills we've honed so patiently; the language or languages we've spoken; the books we've read; the knowledge we've acquired and stored assiduously on mental shelves; the fond memories we've garnered over the years; the dear friends and shared understandings; the unfulfilled hopes; the events on which we gaze back now with nostalgia; the laughter; the happy moments; the bright certainties of future fulfillment: All these must be swept away in a moment as though they had never been.

Has Mozart, relatively little known as he was during his lifetime, realized since his death that the whole world has come to love his music? Does Vincent Van Gogh, who during his lifetime earned hardly fifteen dollars from his great paintings, know now the fabulous worth of each one of them, today? How many great men and women of history have become aware, since they lived, of the influence of their lives on world events? Very few, one suspects. Our lives are like tiny puffs of wind on a few grains of sand.

Life, moreover, may end at any moment. Wouldn't it be a good practice, even now, to prepare for our final "Day of Reckoning"?

Certain practices will help you not only to prepare for that exam, but also to meet your present, daily responsibilities most effectively. Such practices will help you also to prepare for what might be called life's "intermediary exams." An attitude, for example, of non-attachment, so necessary for attaining final freedom after death, will also be a much surer attitude for success in this world than would eager anticipation of success, and excessive dependence on getting results.

Here, then, are a few practices I recommend:

Make it a point, every night before you fall asleep, to check the feelings in your heart. See whether any burrs of attachment are still clinging there, affixed by desires you may have awakened during the day. If you find any such "burrs," mentally build a fire. Cast those burrs into it. Watch with a smile of relief as those burrs disintegrate to ashes.

Every time you take a bath, think as you are washing, for example, an arm, "This will not be my arm forever. Someday it will be ashes or dust." And then affirm, "This is not what I am in my true Self! I am Spirit! I am bliss! I am ever free in God!"

Attachment is not only binding: It is also *blinding*. It stirs up the heart's feelings with emotions of fear, hesitation, and confusion. In anything we do, excessive concern for the outcome of that action saps energy and concentration, both of

these necessary for success in every undertaking. Non-attachment, far from signifying an attitude of indifference, frees us to devote ourselves wholeheartedly to whatever project we attempt. If a person can detach himself emotionally from everything he does, he will find himself capable of living completely in the moment. Everything he attempts, he will then do more effectively.

What is non-attachment? It is not accepting anything as being truly one's own. Everything that seems your own is so *only on loan*. When you nightly build that mental bonfire that I suggested, cast into it, *from your heart*, every branch and twig of thought that you possess anything, every clinging cocoon of self-definition, of personal association in life. Tell yourself, "Everything in my life, indeed my own self, belongs, O Lord, to You."

Non-attachment means above all, in a practical daily sense, the principle of *nishkam karma*, which is defined in the Bhagavad Gita as giving to God the fruits of everything you do and everything to which you even aspire. *Giving* is, however, a tricky word, for, in the sense that it is usually understood, whatever we give we give *away*. Don't give your life to God by abandoning to Him all further responsibility for everything. Act always in a spirit of commitment to what should, for all that, be *impersonal* duty. Thus, when offering the fruits of an action to God, instead of relinquishing further interest in it, offer the outcome to Him, giving Him every final decision in the matter. Meanwhile, *share* with Him everything you do.

When saying "grace" before meals, offer your food up to God not in the sense of giving it away, but of *sharing with Him* your enjoyment of it. When you see something beautiful, share with Him your enjoyment in that beauty. His joy within you will become, in time, your very definition of whatever enjoyment you feel.

One lifetime passes by so quickly. The wheel of repeated rebirths turns very slowly, however, studded with the nails of sorrow and grief. Many incarnations are needed for the soul to pass through this "vale of tears," ere one attains freedom in the Infinite at last. Meanwhile, the Law of Karma works hand-in-hand with another principle: *Dwaita*: duality. Every fulfillment is canceled out, sooner or later, by a disappointment; every success, by a failure; every joy, by a sorrow; every "up" by a corresponding "down." Isn't it ironic, that even after countless incarnations we can never "win the game"? The sum total of all our striving must end always in that final cipher: ZERO!

Why cling so determinedly to what must be lost anyway? All things pass in time. *You alone, in your soul-essence, are what remains eternally*. Why not live more *from today onward* in your inner Self? All else is but a dream. Life succeeds life, each life seeming so real until death comes to end it. Death, too, moreover, wakes us only from that fleeting "dream within a dream." Why not make a serious effort, now, to wake yourself from the long sleep of delusion and ignorance? Realize that nothing of this world has any lasting significance -- not for you; not for anybody.

Old age, and also lingering illness at any age, with the possibility of death: these are the best times, for those who have been dilatory in their preparation, to start "cramming" for one's final exam. At these times, particularly, people may have a tendency to withdraw into themselves, passively. In the astral world after death, such a negative withdrawal before death produces "postmortem" passivity. If, owing to your good deeds (especially to any meditation you've practiced), you are conscious enough to enjoy your astral sojourn, that process of sinking into the death sleep will leave you unable, even after you've re-awakened, to make further spiritual progress in that subtler realm. You may enjoy your existence, but your sojourn there will last only as long as your good karma allows. You will be unable to participate actively enough in that existence to make a positive effort to advance spiritually. Or, perhaps, you will simply not feel the incentive to develop further, since life on that plane seems so idyllic, for most temporary visitors, that they have no aspiration to achieve anything higher.

It may be mentioned here, incidentally, that desires for beautiful and uplifting sensory experiences such as inspiring music and bucolic scenes of earth can be fulfilled also in the astral realm.

I once read about the near-death experience of a would-be suicide, who (fortunately for her) failed in that attempt. She came back from that experience to describe a very different world from anything that might suggest a region of heavenly beauty. She had always, until then, loved "rock" music. During her temporary sojourn in the astral world she found herself in a realm where the predominant vibration was similar to that of rock music. Everyone around her was steeped in a self-enclosing darkness and misery. Shafts of loving light from above sometimes bestirred one soul or another one, but many had been there for a very long time -- for centuries, even, judging by the clothes they wore, which were old-fashioned, even ancient in style. This woman spent years, after she'd been brought back to life, going about and warning people to stop indulging their taste for rock music. Any music that has a low vibration -- not only rock music, but dance and other music with a heavy downbeat, is affirmative of ego-consciousness. Rock 'n' roll, particularly, vibrates with lower astral regions. It is easy to see that the taste for it can draw one down after death to darker regions.

The enjoyment of life also in the higher, beautiful astral realms may last for many earth years, even for centuries, depending on a person's good karma. When his period of karmic respite ends, however, his latent material desires (if he still harbors them) will reawaken, and will draw him back rebirth here on earth, or on some other planet in the material universe.

A belief common in some parts of the world is that the soul's return to earth can be quite haphazard. One may, according to this belief, be reborn in other-than-human forms: as animals, birds, or even insects. ("Don't for heaven's sake squash that spider: It may have been your mother!") Paramhansa Yogananda declared, fortunately, that the likelihood of coming back as anything but human is so remote as to be almost discounted, especially by anyone who is spiritually aware enough to be concerned about it. Rebirth in a lower form *can* happen, admittedly, but it occurs only to those with very heavy materialistic karma. If such should occur, it will be for only one lifetime, and will involve only a short, not a long step downward in evolution. A deeper fall is much rarer, and occurs only in the case of very hardened sinners. Those who are sufficiently evolved to have lived a heavenly existence before returning to earth are born into good families whose influence will help to hasten their upward evolution.

Every return to human life is fraught, however, with many woeful uncertainties. The discriminating person who dreads the danger of any further delays ought to do everything possible to break out of earth's fetters *now*, and forever. Indeed, consider only this: Even for reincarnated yogis, there is always the danger of karmic delays. Consider even this, the least of them: the time one wastes spiritually as he passes through infancy, childhood, adolescence, and perhaps then getting enmeshed in further worldly involvements. Sooner or later his good karma will draw him back to his spiritual quest, but *how* soon? or *how* late? We have every incentive to start as early as possible, while still we inhabit these present bodies, to prepare for our "final exam."

Throughout life, and particularly during old age or prolonged illness, when a person may feel a special impetus to start "cramming" for his own final exam, there are things he can do to make his present existence spiritually fruitful. From this point on, therefore, let me address you, the reader, as much as possible in the second person, for my hope is to inspire you to take the thoughts I offer here very personally.

CHECK LIST

1. Life Review: Go over your life up to the present moment. Concentrate rather on the happy times than on the sad, since positive expectations will be more likely to attract you to a happy state after death. Still, do not *avoid* reflecting on any mistakes you may have made. Try, instead, to view those mistakes in a positive light. Bear in mind also the following important points:

a) Feelings of guilt will block your further progress, and act as affirmations of failure. Cast out guilt from your heart, therefore. You might even, if you want to, tell God frankly, "It's *You* who set up this wretched shadow show! It isn't *my* fault entirely that I was too inexperienced to know where the pitfalls lay!"

A certain Catholic saint (I forget her name) had many visions of people "on the other side." Often the departed souls she saw, many of whom were unknown to her, were later verified as having lived on earth. What struck me particularly about her visions was the astonishingly large number who were in hell, or in purgatory, though they had been nuns here on earth and living spiritually dedicated lives. How could such souls possibly have fallen so low? That saint said it was because of their feelings of guilt. Yet that so-called "guilt," in each case I read about, was for only some minor sin like failing to be properly obedient to a monastic superior! How could such "sins" have brought them to that miserable state? The only explanation I can think of is that they'd been conditioned to feel unnecessarily guilty over those "sins."

I remember a student of Yogananda's, a Mr Brockway, very dignified. He was a retired architect. I visited him in the hospital shortly before his death. As he lay there, his outward awareness waning, I heard him mutter sadly, "I've done many wrong things in my life!" I mentioned later to my Guru what he'd said. He responded sadly, "He shouldn't have said that."

Another sad recollection during that same episode: I heard a hospital orderly addressing that dignified patient as "Ernie." To me, "Ernie" deserved rather the appellation, "Mr Brockway." It appalled me to hear him addressed so familiarly, and by a virtual stranger. It seems to me as much now as it did then that all of us should treat one another, and perhaps especially ourselves, with dignity. For we are souls made in God's image.

Confession and final absolution may be a good thing, if they leave the penitent feeling truly released from his sins. Usually, however, this death rite seems more likely to leave the dying person dwelling more on his sins than on how completely he has been released from them. For must he not surely think afterward, "Did I remember to confess *all* my sins? And was I, in every case, sufficiently contrite?" Surely there is a good chance that he will continue to dwell on this concern with sin. Surely it is better to make one's confession to God, and to ask *Him* directly for *His* forgiveness. Even then, I wonder how adequate it is to seek forgiveness. God is stuck with us anyway -- one might say, whether He likes it or not! We are a part of His eternal consciousness.

As Master said to a disciple who asked him, "But Sir, you *will* forgive me, won't you?" Master replied with astonishment, "What else can I do?"

One time, fearing the possibility that the soul may experience eternal destruction, I questioned my Guru on this point. His answer was very definite: "The soul is a part of God. No part of God can *ever* be destroyed." The soul simply cannot be damned for all eternity, either! Our final destiny is fixed and immutable: Sooner or later, we *must* all be saved, even if it take us innumerable aeons.

OF COURSE God forgives you! What is needed only is *your own* forgiveness!

Go over your past mistakes, then, and offer them up to God. Don't think of them as "sins," for they were committed in ignorance of the underlying, true nature of things. God alone has dreamed your existence. He infused into you from the beginning your delusion of ego-identity. View any mistakes you've made as having been made *by Him*, through your own dream-existence!

Here's a way you can do it: Think of everything that to you is attractive. Then withdraw your energy from that attraction, and concentrate on the superior attractiveness of inner, soul-bliss. Bliss is the higher and true alternative to every outward attraction. In soul-bliss -- even in the memory of it, and even (I might add) in the *affirmation* of it -- notice how, by comparison, sensory attractions simply disappear. At this point in your reflections you will find it reactively easy to offer up every lesser attraction to God.

If you remember ever having hurt anyone, or acted unjustly toward him, send blessings to him mentally. Visualize him (or her) swimming in the ocean of God's bliss.

If ever you've desecrated your own higher life-aspirations, face quite frankly what you've done, but don't beat yourself mentally and emotionally for having done wrong. Rather, say to God, "It was You, Lord, acting through my ignorance. Come fully into that experience, now. I want to share it with You, in order that I may understand fully that it really *was* You: Your energy, wrongly directed by my folly. I won't cling to that thought any longer. I release it! I see it evaporating in skies of Infinite Bliss! Help me to see that, compared to Your light, my folly has been only an empty darkness, foreign forever to my true Self."

If ever you have spoken or acted inconsiderately toward another human being, even if only in haste, recreate that scene in your mind; ask God to bless all those whom you may ever have hurt. Project rays of love and bliss outward from your heart to all who have ever had to bear the brunt of your anger, impatience, or unkindness.

If ever you've held an unkind or angry thought toward anyone, send blessings to him, replacing those harsh vibrations. Bring yourself to the point where you think of that person kindly. Don't consider it sufficient merely to *forgive* him, for forgiveness may imply a lingering thought of his *need* to be forgiven. Send kindness, rather, and tell him mentally, "It is your job, not mine, to work out any problems you may have to face. Meanwhile, for my part I wish you strength, happiness, and wisdom. We are fellow pilgrims on the long journey to eternal bliss in God, our common Father."

If in any way you've ever cheated anyone, or deprived him of his dues, ask God to bless that person; send also your own blessings. It might even be good to pray that that person be reimbursed out of whatever store of good karma you yourself have accumulated.

If ever you've spoken critically of, or mocked anyone even mentally, offer that person heartfelt kindness, support, and good wishes for his eventual wisdom and inner freedom.

If ever you've acted in any such way as to make you feel embarrassed, now, laugh happily with God over that moment of folly. Share it with Him as a good joke. Tell Him, "I've learned something from that experience. But please, Lord, don't let me make such a fool of myself ever again!"

b) Remember this: Every desire must be fulfilled. My Guru once made that statement to me, and I asked him, "*Every* desire? Even for something as trivial as an ice cream cone?" His answer surprised me, it was so definite. He didn't even smile. "Oh *yes*!" he assured me. Don't, however, try to search out every fleeting wish you may have had. (That process might take forever!) Rather, make a sweeping overview of your life and say, simply, "It is all Yours, Lord. I want only Thee, nothing but Thee!"

I heard about a fellow disciple who, at the end of her life, was blessed to linger on for two weeks. Those two weeks gave her the time she needed to let go of everything, mentally. Years later, a brother disciple who had known her said to me, "I could see her saying to herself day after day, 'This desire doesn't matter to me anymore,' and, 'I no longer feel that attachment.' Every day she looked freer, more centered in the Self. At the moment of death she cried out with deep joy, 'Swamiji is here!' [Swamiji was what the disciples used to call our Guru.] At that point, she left her body."

Go over each desire mentally, and offer it to God. Think of the higher, spiritual counterpart of the fulfillment promised by that desire.

If, for instance, you've had a desire for a car, don't merely tell yourself, "I won't be needing a car anymore." Say, rather, "Now I will fly in heavenly freedom through vast skies of eternal bliss!"

If your desire was for -- yes, let's say it, for an ice cream cone! -- remember these words, addressed to me by Anandamayee Ma, a wonderful woman saint whom I knew in India. Speaking with a radiant smile as she gave me a few sweetmeats, she said, "*Sabsomoy mishiti khao* -- Always eat nothing but sweetness!"

If your desire was for a mate, offer that desire up to God, and pray for the supreme bliss of eternal union with Him.

If you've had a desire to go anywhere or to see anything, tell God, "Let me soar in Infinity. Let me enjoy Thee everywhere, in everything!"

If your desire was to do anything at all, tell God, "In infinite consciousness, I will accomplish *everything!*"

Mostly, dwell on happy thoughts. Tell yourself, and tell God, "This life has been a brief dance in Your bliss. Even the hard tests You've sent me have been helpful to me. I've learned so much from them; I'm grateful for all of them; they have been priceless lessons. But I offer everything, now, up to You. It was Your life I lived, not mine. Let me rest now, eternally, in Your love."

2. If you feel any attachments, visualize a cord stretched out from your heart to them. With a sharp knife sever that cord, or (more vigorously) slice through it with an axe. Feel that every attachment is being cut off and replaced by the divine blessing of inner freedom.
3. Dwell on the thought of that freedom: freedom from every delusion, every desire, every attachment, every self-definition. Above all -- if you feel able to do so -- rid yourself of the thought of having a personal, separate, individual identity. You are nothing but a ray of God's light. See your little sense of reality becoming absorbed in His bliss.
4. Listen to spiritual recordings, whether of music, of lofty, God-affirming mantras, or of God-reminding thoughts. Listen to someone chanting *AUM*, or reciting selected scriptural passages. Listen to recordings by persons whose voices express higher consciousness.
5. Dwell on thoughts of God's eternal love for you and for all creatures. Dwell not only on His forgiveness, but on His utter *acceptance* of you as His very own through all eternity.
6. Pray for all beings. Bless them in God's light. Send them love. Reflect that everyone on earth, no matter how deeply deluded he may be, is in his own way seeking eternal bliss. Reflect also that it is *his destiny* to find that bliss, no matter how long the journey for him. *All* beings, equally, are children of the same one Light, Love, and Bliss that Jesus Christ knew, and Krishna (Christna), and Buddha. It is the underlying nature of **YOUR OWN, ETERNAL SELF!**

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS:

1. Q. *Is the "postmortem passivity" you mentioned necessarily a bad thing?*

A. No, not necessarily *bad*. It gives souls the rest and respite they need, if that is what they want. If, however, you want to keep on advancing spiritually, your consciousness must be fired with determination. It cannot be passive.

2. Q. *If someone sinks into a coma, or seems perhaps already dead, might it help him to chant AUM in his presence?*

A. Yes. Chant softly, particularly in the right ear. The sense of hearing, Yogananda said, is the last of the senses to go. A person may appear dead, but may not yet have withdrawn completely from the body. By chanting *AUM*, or by calling to him in the right ear, you may actually bring him back to life.

Yogananda told of two students of his during his early years in America. One of them, a young woman, died, or seemed to have died. Her brother, also a student of this path, called to her urgently in her right ear, "Sister, come back! I'm not ready for you to leave me. I need you. *Please* come back to me!"

After a minute or so she actually opened her eyes. "I heard you calling to me," she said, "as if from a great distance!"

3. Q. *Is there anything else we can do to help someone who is dying?*

A. Yes. Place your finger on his forehead at a point midway between the eyebrows. This is the seat of ecstasy, will power, and concentration in the body. Direct energy through your finger to that point, and try to draw that person's energy up in focus there.

At death, people usually sink back passively into unconsciousness. Thus, they leave the body, as the soul first entered it, through the medulla oblongata. Next they pass through what the Greeks called “the waters of Lethe”: forgetfulness of this life. Remembrance may return later on, to some extent, but generally speaking people simply pass on from there to a new life.

Yogananda did say that our loved ones may come to us in dreams. He shared with us an account of the mother of a disciple of his who had died of breast cancer. He sought this soul out in the astral world. As he told us later, “I saw her being led away by an angel. She was pausing at that moment, admiring a beautiful flower. I called to her, and she turned back. At first she didn’t recognize me. Then I touched her on the forehead, and she exclaimed, ‘I remember! I remember! I’ll never forget you again.’”

4. Q. *How much effort should be expended toward keeping a dying person alive?*

A. It is right, of course, to try to save him. I consider it a mistake, however, to resort to what are termed “heroic efforts” to do so.

My own father suffered a heart attack one year before his actual death. At that time he was mentally prepared to go. I remember him saying to me, “I’ve had a good life, and I have no regrets. I’m ready to go now, whenever the time should arrive.”

The doctors went to “heroic” lengths, however, to keep him alive. And that last year was the most unhappy of my father’s life -- perhaps the *only* really unhappy period of it. He could hardly see; his hearing was almost gone; his sense of taste and smell virtually disappeared. Even his sense of touch was minimal. How much better it would have been for him to die when he had mentally given his consent to do so!

On the other hand, a friend of mine once asked me, “How much effort should I put forth to remain alive? I feel ready to go at any time.” I replied, “Think of what a job it is: being reborn and coming back again as a baby, then growing up, then taking who knows how long before remembering your spiritual aspiration and deciding to take up that responsibility seriously. Think of the risks involved also, of further detours, and of consequent pain! I suggest that, as long as you feel able to make a spiritual effort, you do your best to stay alive, that you may keep working toward your own salvation.” Fortunately, she took my advice. She lived several years thereafter, years which were important for her spiritual growth.

5. Q. *Many people, when they die, are in great pain. The doctors give them pain medication, but as a result the patients, often, are only barely conscious. Is that a good thing, or a bad?*

A. I would say that the greater the extent to which a person is able to retain his consciousness, without requiring sedation, the better.

6. Q. *What about people who go into a coma before they die? Will they necessarily go out unconsciously?*

A. I’m not sure, but I think it depends primarily on the spiritual effort a person has made during his lifetime. If his effort has been deep and sincere, I think such a thing as a final coma will prove only temporary, for its cause will be merely physical. As soon as he leaves his body, surely, he will wake up again in his astral form.

7. Q. *If desires are what bring us back to be reborn on this plane, is it not also a mistake to desire to know God?*

A. Of course not! No uplifting desire is wrong. Rather, it rates as what is called a “desireless desire,” for it helps to free one from ego-consciousness and to lift him toward freedom in God. Bondage to ego is what makes our desires wrong. They strengthen our delusion. Specific desires, moreover, determine to a great extent our next state of existence. As Yogananda put it, “If you die with an attachment to curried food, you may be reborn in India. If you go out with a hankering for apple pie, you may be reborn in America.” He was speaking also, of course, in a spirit of light humor.

I remember seeing a friend eating curry who had often told me he didn’t like it. He explained to me quite seriously, “Master said if we like curry we’ll be reborn in India. I hope to be reborn there, so I’m trying to overcome my distaste for curry by eating it now!” I commented, “Such things are determined by many factors. Don’t give so much emphasis to this one factor alone!”

8. Q. *What effect does grieving for a departed person have on him?*

A. Grief is born of attachment. It can hold the soul back, and keep it tied to this earthly plane of existence. Try, instead, to help speed others on their way by sending them loving blessings that they soar upwards in divine freedom.

9. Q. Will the disciples of a true guru see him on the other side?

A. Our Guru told us, “Those disciples who stick it out to the end -- not for just ‘sticking it out,’ but for the love of God -- I myself, or one of our other gurus, will be waiting to welcome them on the other side.”

10. Q. Is it a good thing to donate one’s bodily organs to help others who are still living?

A. In a somewhat abstract sense it is, of course, a good thing. Death, however, is a sacred occasion. I myself would not want anyone “mucking about” with my organs at that time. A dying person’s consciousness doesn’t withdraw immediately from the body. The fact that his physical organs still have enough vitality to be useful to someone else means that the life force has not yet withdrawn from them fully.

11. Q. Which is better: cremation, or burial?

A. Generally speaking, cremation is better. For it actually happens, occasionally, that people return to outward awareness after they’ve been buried. Think of the horror of waking up in your own coffin! The expression, “He would turn over in his grave if he heard that,” is based on the observation of corpses that, on exhumation, have been found turned over in their graves.

The mother of Robert E. Lee “died” temporarily when she was still a young woman. She was in her coffin, which was still above ground, when she returned to outward consciousness. Knocking desperately on her coffin, she was heard and was hastily rescued. It was *after* that event, in fact, that she gave birth to Robert.

On the other hand, it is better not to cremate saints. Their physical bodies retain high vibrations that will help anyone who prays to them later at their tombs. My Guru said Lahiri Mahasaya’s body should not have been cremated, even though he was a householder. (Usually, the bodies of swamis are buried, with the rationale that they’ve been “cremated” already at the time they took their *sannyas* vows of renunciation.)

12. Q. I know suicide is considered a sin. Are there any extenuating circumstances when suicide might be a virtue?

A. Of course there are! A person may sacrifice his life for a high cause, or in expiation for some sin he himself has committed. This second rationale should be reserved, however, for persons of spiritual realization. And it depends always on the motivation behind the deed.

13. Q. Can it help those who have died to pray for them?

A. Indeed, yes. It may be good also to pray *to* them. I recall a time, years ago, when I’d intended to pray for my departed mother on her birthday. When that day came, however, I suffered a sudden episode with my heart, which began beating rapidly and irregularly. I found myself praying *to* my mother, instead of *for* her. Help arrived, inwardly, instantaneously. My mother was a very spiritual woman, but I believe that many who have gone before us can help us also, if we but ask them.

14. Q. Should one be vigilant about superficial distractions as one grows old?

A. Yes, certainly one should. Many old people waste their time sitting all day before their television sets, or playing cards. Television is especially pernicious. I myself never watch it. The thought of all those worldly personalities invading my consciousness with their foolish ideas and attitudes: what an absurdity! Yogananda referred to television as “satanic.”



In summation, two things will help you especially in preparing for your “final exam”:

- First, try as much as possible to avoid anything that might have a distracting influence on your mind. Avoid especially things that might draw your thoughts downward into negative thoughts and emotions.
- Second, surround yourself as much as possible with uplifting, God-reminding influences.

*By following these simple rules, you will pass that exam with “flying colors,”
and will find, through it, your portal to eternal freedom.*