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## Life and Death

Lessons from the Mayfly  
and the Cicada



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Ken Jeremiah  
Life and Death

Lessons from the Mayfly and the Cicada:  
Transitions between Life and Death



**S**ome species of mayflies only live for a few minutes. Considering this fact, one has to wonder what the purpose is—what they could possibly accomplish in such an insignificant amount of time. But time is not constant, and perceptions of time vary. Numerous scientific studies have suggested that there is likely a chemical in the brain that influences how time is perceived. In certain stressful situations, like during a car accident, time seems to slow down. Individuals who have survived car wrecks typically report the sensation that the accident occurred in slow motion. Sometimes, facing an unexpected attacker, the same thing occurs, and it seems that the enemy is punching or kicking in slow motion. This altered perception of time can be attained in other ways. The use of psychedelic drugs also affects it. Users report feeling as though hours have passed, only to later realize that it has only been a few minutes. The naturally occurring compound dimethyltryptamine (DMT) is found in human beings and in other creatures in minute amounts. Known by some as a gateway to the gods, it also alters the perception of time. One DMT user revealed, “I don’t know if it was my birth that I was reexperiencing, or my death which has yet to come, because I know that time crumbles. The linearity of time is totally meaningless in these states. You are at the Godhead, the point where time folds in on itself.”<sup>1</sup> Another said, “There is no concept of time.”<sup>2</sup> One subject in an experiment reported feeling as though years had passed while he was under the influence of the drug. When he returned, he asked how long he had been gone. The researcher replied, “15 minutes.” The patient could not believe it. He said, “For a moment I’m shocked...I’m like, you know, the mind has to catch up, because now the whole cognitive dissonance of the experience has to catch up...I was gone for 15 minutes....1,000 years of experience in 15 minutes.”<sup>3</sup> Experiments with DMT and other drugs reveal that this naturally occurring compound may cause diverse creatures to experience time differently based on the amount of this chemical that is present. Therefore, it is likely that a mayfly experiences its life as humans experience theirs, even though their lifespans are incredibly short compared to the lifespan of human beings. In other words, although we might perceive their lives as being short, they likely perceive their lives as lasting for decades, like we experience our own. From Buddhist and Hindu perspectives alike, the lifespans of human beings are also incredibly short. Regarding the former, beings in the Tusita Heaven, where the future Buddha Maitreya resides, live for the equivalence of 1,600,000 earth years. In the Hindu cosmogony, a day in the life of Brahma is 4.32 billion years. Our lives, compared to such creatures, are as short and as seemingly insignificant as that of the mayfly. However, there is more to it than meets the eye. Every creature has a purpose. Before becoming a mayfly, such creatures spend up to a year in a transitory state in water. During this time period, they are called naiads. Eventually, they go through a metamorphosis. They develop wings, and they attain freedom. As mayflies, they are no longer trapped in the water. They can flutter about through the sky as they wish. Regarding the process of change itself, these creatures are not mindful of the metamorphosis. It happens naturally, and when they change, their minds change with the transformation. When one form is extinguished, the mind that accompanies that form is also extinguished. Issai Chozanshi wrote:

Even if I am reborn into something after this, my present mind will be completely extinguished. Even if I become an ant or a mouse, I’ll have the mind of whatever I am born as and should live appropriately. One life is like a dream, and the next world will also be one life. That, too, will be like a dream.<sup>4</sup> Yin and yang come together and there is form; revolving within that form and its ch’i, there are functions of motion and rest, and speech and silence. When the vitality is exhausted, it departs from the form, and this is called death. It is because there is vitality in this form that there is a mind with happiness and anger, and likes and dislikes. After this form dies, the vitality is exhausted. In what way could this mind remain? A fire is kindled with burning wood. Once the wood is consumed, the fire goes out on its own. Though there may be some remaining smoke, it cannot stay for long. Though we say the fire has been extinguished, it will once again be transmitted from a piece of flint. But it is not that the fire that has already been extinguished is coming back from the flint.<sup>5</sup>

Human beings, like the mayfly, go through a metamorphosis. And like mayflies and other creatures that go through such changes, their physical bodies are prepared for the change. All over the world humans mummify the dead, and they bury them in protective casings, like creatures who lie dormant in cocoons before emerging in a different state. Many societies placed the dead in baskets, or wrapped them in

fetal positions before burial. The deceased would wait for their rebirth in this position, the same position in which they initially waited to be born. An example of this custom is found at Huaca Pucllana, in Lima, Peru (figure 1). Bodies that were wrapped in this way, when unearthed, were often preserved (figures 2, 3 and 4).



*Figure 1. Wari tomb at Huaca Pucllana, in Lima, Peru*



*Figure 2. Mummy at Huallamarca, Peru | Figure 3. Mummy at Pukara, Peru*





Figure 4. Mummy at Pukara, Peru

Like the mayfly, humans also go through a metamorphosis. Some individuals felt so strongly about the existence of this change that they caused their own deaths. The self-mummified monks of Japan, for example, prepared their bodies and minds over the course of a decade by means of ascetic practices. When they felt that they were ready for their transformation, they buried themselves alive in underground tombs. They hoped that their bodies would be preserved. Of the hundreds who attempted this feat, less than thirty were successful. The practices utilized were arduous. Some who followed this path died before reaching their destination. Others made it long enough to be buried alive, but they failed: their bodies did not mummify. However, there were a select group of monks who did manage to mummify themselves. These include Honmyokai (1623-1683), a samurai warrior who turned to asceticism to save his sick lord, Shinnyokai (1688-1783), a farmer who killed a samurai before entering the priesthood, and Tetsumonkai (1768-1829), who killed two samurai who had disrespected the woman he loved. He fled to Churen Temple in Tsuruoka in order to escape from prosecution, and while there, he became a believer. Many of the self-mummified monks had committed acts that they were not proud of early on in life, and they may have initially turned to religion in order to atone for their previous deeds. This demonstrates that change is possible throughout life, not just at the very end of it. However, the change that these individuals and others like them concerned themselves with was the metamorphosis from life to death. It was this event that they prepared for. The monks who undertook this training were called *issei gyonin*. The term means “one who is an ascetic for his or her entire life.” Those who succeeded in mummifying themselves were called *sokushinbutsu*, a term that signifies “one who has attained Buddhahood in the flesh.” They began a life of extreme ascetic practices, and they undertook a diet called *mokujikigyo*. This term literally means “tree-eating,” but it refers to abstention from cereals. For 3,000 days or more, the monks cut out all grains. They did not eat anything made from rice, wheat, awa (foxtail millet), kibi (proso millet) or soybeans. In their place, they ate butterburs, berries, tree bark, and pine needles for years, gradually reducing the amount eaten as time progressed. Eventually, this decrease in the amount eaten would lead to death by starvation. But before dying, they sought out suitable places to bury themselves alive, and when they thought the

time was right, they entered their coffins. Sitting in meditative posture, chanting, their followers nailed the lids of these boxes shut and then buried them, leaving only small breathing tubes that would provide oxygen. While meditating, the buried monks rang bells. Once their followers could no longer hear the bells, they removed the breathing tubes and left the graves alone for three years. At the end of this period of time, the bodies were unearthed. If they had mummified, they were redressed and enshrined as objects of worship in nearby temples. If they had not, an exorcism was performed and they were simply reburied. These individuals did not believe that they were suicidal. Nor did they believe that their actions would be the end of them, for they did not think that they were causing their own true deaths. They believed that they would enter a state of being called *nyujo*, which is neither dead nor alive. According to some researchers, the term refers to sitting on the ground in meditative posture and attaining a state of awakening.<sup>6</sup> Raveri stated that the word signified a union of the spirit—A state of “invulnerable immobility, completely closed to all external and internal stimuli.”<sup>7</sup> The individuals who chose to die in this way—by burying themselves alive—thought that they were entering a state that was between life and death. There is a common metaphor used to describe this state of being. Individuals that attain this state of non-death are often compared to cicadas. Most religions in the world philosophically divide the individual into two distinct parts, the physical and the spiritual. The body, which is only needed during the life portion of the continuum, is shed at the moment of death, much like a cicada sheds its shell. The monks who buried themselves alive, and whose bodies were found to have mummified, are compared to cicadas; so are individuals who were found to have been naturally preserved. A famous example is the Buddhist and Daoist practitioner Tan Tao Kai. He died in 359. His followers put his body in a stone enclosure on Lo Fu Mountain. When they visited the grave four years later, they found that his body was perfectly mummified. One of his disciples commented that due to his conduct during life, his body was cast off like the shell of a cicada upon death. Sharf explained, “The reference to the cicada’s shell (ch’an t’ui) alludes to the Taoist [sic] belief that the accomplished Immortal sheds his body just as the cicada sheds his exuviae, leaving behind a mere husk as his spirit soars to the realm of Immortals.”<sup>8</sup> This description, along with the common perception of death and dead bodies, seems to indicate that the body is but a shell alone: empty and without significance.



Figure 5. Honmyokai (1623-1683)





*Figure 6. Shinnyokai (1688-1783)*



*Figure 7. Enmyokai (1767-1821)*





*Figure 8. Chukai (1697-1755)*



However, the body cannot be insignificant. The self-mummified monks tortured themselves for a decade before burying themselves alive. Their practices were utilized in order to preserve the bodies. The bodies were obviously important to them, since they strove to mummify them. Likewise, the corpses were important to others, as they were displayed in special temple halls in northern Japan. The bodies continue to be displayed in temples, and individuals come from nearby villages in order to pray before them. This practice is not unique to the East. Christians in Europe and the Americas likewise treat the bodies after death in order to prevent decay, and they go to visit these bodies. They pray before the remains, and many people have reported the occurrence of miraculous events that have taken place in the proximity of the corpses of holy individuals. The physical remains are so important in Roman Catholic Christianity that elaborate mummification procedures are carried out to protect the bodies of important members of the clergy or potential saints. Many of the so-called Incorruptibles, on display in churches and cathedrals in Italy, Spain, France and other countries were initially thought to have been miraculously preserved. Recent investigations have determined that almost all of them had actually been intentionally mummified.<sup>9</sup> Even bodies that have been treated are not safe from eventual decay, however. Those bodies that decomposed even after being treated were covered with silver or gold masks, or they were coated with wax. The wax was then shaped to resemble the deceased individuals that it covered.



*Figure 9. The body of St. Tarcisius at the Basilica of San Domenico Maggiore (Naples, Italy)*





*Figure 10. The body of Pope John XXIII, located at St. Peter's Cathedral in the Vatican.*



*Figure 11. The wax-covered body of Saint Bernardo da Corleone (1605-1667), located in Palermo, Sicily.*

These bodies are important for the living. There are other locations that do not just have one or two bodies on display, but hundreds or even thousands of them. One such place is the Capuchins Catacombs in Palermo, Sicily (figure 12). Another is their catacombs in Rome (figures 13 and 14), located under the Church of the Immaculate Conception. The one in Rome contains approximately



6,000 skeletons and mummies that have been arranged artistically. Visitors walk through the site viewing each of the rooms, which are decorated with specific body parts. They have names based upon the part displayed. For example, there is a crypt of skulls, a crypt of pelvises, and a crypt of leg bones and thigh bones. In the last room that pilgrims or curious tourists visit is a sign. It is written as though the dead were speaking to the living. It reads, “What you are, we once were. What we are, you will become.”



*Figure 12. Catacombs in Palermo, Sicily*



*Figure 13. The Capuchin Cemetery in Rome, Italy*





*Figure 14. Cemetery beneath the Church of the Immaculate Conception (Rome)*

We are surrounded by life and death. Every day, people are born. Others die. Death cannot be escaped, and yet few know about it. Considering the phenomenon might prove difficult, as for many people answers to their questions are not forthcoming. However, when the phenomenon of death is considered while viewing the bodies of the deceased, it becomes easier to comprehend. Life and death are both facets of the same phenomenon. They are just different aspects of it. Day cannot exist without night, and night cannot exist without day. This interaction has been written about at length in the holy texts of many of the world's religions. It is the interaction of yin and yang in Chinese religion, and in yin and yang in Japanese philosophy. In Hinduism, it is the metaphysical concept of Shiva and Parvati, who are represented iconographically as a single being. It is related to the notion of mana, and it encompasses the Hindu belief in the transmigration of the soul. It also reflects the common belief among ancient Egyptians, Christians, Hindus, Jains and followers of many other religions that the soul or spirit is separate from the body—that the death of the body does not mean the death of the individual. Even though the physical body may die, the essence or energy infused in those remains cannot be snuffed out. Life may seem short, insignificant. But time is relative. Some creatures, like the mayfly, live for minutes alone, while others, like some species of tortoises, live for more than 150 years. Every creature experiences life at its own pace, and what might seem incredibly short or long to us is an appropriate life span for each creature. The length of a life is insignificant compared to what is accomplished during it. Keep in mind, however, that accomplishments such as attaining a university degree or amassing millions of dollars are insignificant. After death, wealth and certifications serve no real purpose. It is a common belief among many of the world's religions that life is a training ground. The existence of the physical body is needed in order to gain an understanding of the complex nature of reality. Without physicality, existing as pure energy in a formless state may be bliss, but it will limit one's perception of the way things are. The physical body provides us with senses. The complex computer that creates its own electricity, called the brain, stores and catalogues information, making connections and imagining possibilities. Through physical existence, we can gain an in-depth understanding of reality. At the end of our lives, however, we will quit our bodies. We will shed them just like a cicada sheds its shell. There is an allegory about this metamorphosis involving a cicada speaking to his cast-off shell. He said, "In the beginning, you and I were both one. It is not that I

wanted to leave you, but it has happened on its own accord. I will go off, enjoying life, flying wherever I wish to fly. You on the other hand, will remain on the ground, devoid of life. Eventually, you will be completely reduced to dust, and the wind will sweep you away. You will cease to exist. However, this is not what I wanted. It is just the natural way of life and death. Please do not be angry with me.”

The empty shell replied:

You are extremely confused. Everything between heaven and earth has its own fate, which is not something we have the brains to understand. More than that, though you may sprout wings and sing in a nice shady spot, there is the danger that a crow might come up unexpectedly and eat you. It is the way of the world that if there is joy, there will certainly be sorrow. I now yield up to you my mind, spirit, energy and blood; I will spend my time at great leisure and take joy in tranquility. What else should I require? Without loving life or hating death, I myself will know nothing of good luck or bad fortune, of honor or shame. If I’m blown by the wind, I’ll tumble along following the wind; if the wind stops, I’ll stop too, and won’t act contrary to things. Even if my form is worn out and my legs broken off, I’ll feel no pain; and if I can’t do things on my own, I won’t have anything under heaven to be anxious or afraid about either. When you reflect on the riches and honors of kings and lords, even they are not worth it. Because I haven’t got anything inside of me, I’ve escaped from the world of pleasure and pain, of gain and loss. Keeping my mouth shut, I comprehend the Buddha’s “bliss of entering Nirvana.”<sup>10</sup>

Comparing human beings to both mayflies and cicadas may help to clarify the true significance of both life and death. We will all shed our bodies, as cicadas shed their husks. Looking at some naturally mummified bodies found in Ferentillo, Italy, will make this clear:



*Figure 15. Mummified head in Ferentillo, Italy*





*Figure 16. Mummy in Ferentillo*



*Figure 17. Another mummy at the Church of St. Stephen*





*Figure 18. This individual died in this position.  
He may remain in this position for centuries to come.*



*Figure 19. A well preserved head in Ferentillo.*

Looking at these preserved remains, especially the preserved head with a full set of teeth (figure 19) reminds us of the analogy of the cicada. We shed our bodies at the moment of death. It is a casing alone. However, without the body, our understanding of the universe and the nature of reality would be limited. People must learn to use the physical body in order to learn about the nature of the spirit. There are various religious traditions in the world that point the way. But people as a whole get attached to physicality. They get attached to ritual and they join religious organizations, taking what the organization says about life and death as the extreme truth. In order to begin searching for answers, they must seek out the proper questions. Forget about ritual. Drop the “we know all” attitude, and truly empty your cup. Only then can it be filled. Once you have emptied yourself of preconceived notions and beliefs, look at how nature proceeds in front of you. Everything heard the call of the creator and is here for a purpose. Everything lives, and everything that has life must eventually face death. One aspect of this continuum is not more important than the other. Quit what you (think you) know. Open your heart to the truth, and it will be revealed to you.



## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Schultz, M. (Director). *DMT: The Spirit Molecule* (DVD).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Chozanshi, *The Demon's Sermon on the Martial Arts*, p. 38.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., pp. 38-39.

<sup>6</sup> Jeremiah, *Living Buddhas*.

<sup>7</sup> Raveri, M. *Il Corpo e il Paradiso*, p. 86.

<sup>8</sup> Sharf, R. *The Idolization of Enlightenment*, pp. 7-8.

<sup>9</sup> Jeremiah, *Christian Mummification*.

<sup>10</sup> Chozanshi, *The Demon's Sermon on the Martial Arts*, pp. 69-70.

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Dr. Ken Jeremiah has written extensively about history and religion. His previous books include *Living Buddhas: The Self-Mummified Monks of Yamagata, Japan*, *Christian Mummification: An Interpretive History of the Preservation of Saints, Martyrs, and Others*, *If the Samurai Played Golf...Zen Strategies for a Winning Game*, and *Aikido Ground Fighting*. More information can be found at [www.kenjeremiah.com](http://www.kenjeremiah.com).





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