

Keijijōgaku

Our ancient ancestors observed that “things” existed in three categories. There were things that were alive (life), there were things that were not alive and had not been previously (inanimate objects), and then there were things that were not alive now, but had been previously (dead). There was clearly something invisible and untouchable, but very crucial that the first had that the last had lost, some essence that slipped away quietly at the moment of death.

This has been the fundamental and axiomatic concept of life and death among humanity from time immemorial; that something is present in the living that is not present in inanimate matter and that was present in the dead but has departed. Most also imagine, through their religions and belief systems that the thing that departs upon death is not dissipated, but remains and passes to some other place reserved for departed essences, where it retains the personality, memories and burdens of the deceased. The modern form of the idea has been codified in popular visual entertainment, in children’s cartoons and adult horror movies, and evidence suggests that burial rites and ideas of the afterlife have been in human culture for at least the last 200,000 years.

The fundamental equation always works in only one direction, that something is subtracted from the living to make the dead. Fiction may provide that the equation can work in the other direction, but such is not known to occur or to have ever occurred in the combined experience of humanity. Further, as humanity has no control over the creation of life or the moment of death; that this essence has not thus far submitted to empirical study, or even appeared to our senses, it has uniformly historically been regarded as something beyond humanity, something from the realms of the gods or God.

Eighty thousand humans and countless other living creatures were instantly incinerated in the flash at Hiroshima on August 6, 1945. In milliseconds or less, bodies disappeared in uncontrolled heat and light that approximates the temperatures found on the surface of the Sun. Another flash followed at Nagasaki three days later.

No one has ever known the amount of time it actually takes for the essence of life to depart a body; but most people assume – without the slightest substantiation – that the process happens rather instantaneously at the moment of death – a letting go or losing the grip on life. Most would also agree that regular light bulbs come on instantaneously or nearly so the moment a light switch is flipped. Thus an idea can be formed of the amount of time that appears to be instantaneous and momentary to a human observer.

What happens or what is the difference then, if the body of living matter is destroyed in a millisecond or less, less time possibly than that “instant” required for the essence to depart or dissipate from the body in the normal manner of death? What happens if it is the body that departs the essence rather than the essence that departs the body at the moment of death?