Editor's Foreword • Bruce Greyson, M.D.

Guest Editorial:
The Near-Death Experience: An Ancient Truth, a Modern Mystery • Elizabeth W. Fenske, Ph.D.

Near-Death Encounters with and without Near-Death Experiences: Comparative NDE Scale Profiles • Bruce Greyson, M.D.

Community Attitudes Toward Near-Death Experiences: A Chinese Study • Allan Kellehear, Ph.D., Patrick Heaven, Ph.D., and Jia Gao, B.A.

The Near-Death Experience and the Taoism of Chuang Tzu • E. J. Hermann

Letters to the Editor • John White, Dan Punzak
Journal of Near-Death Studies

Volume 8, Number 3, Spring 1990

Editor's Foreword

Bruce Greyson, M.D.

GUEST EDITORIAL

The Near-Death Experience: An Ancient Truth, A Modern Mystery

Elizabeth W. Fenske, Ph.D.

ARTICLES

Near-Death Encounters With and Without Near-Death Experiences: Comparative NDE Scale Profiles

Bruce Greyson, M.D.

Community Attitudes Toward Near-Death Experiences: A Chinese Study

Allan Kellehear, Ph.D., Patrick Heaven, Ph.D., and Jia Gao, B.A.

The Near-Death Experience and the Taoism of Chuang Tzu

E. J. Hermann

Letters to the Editor

John White
Dan Punzak

Announcement
Editor’s Foreword

This issue of the Journal opens with a Guest Editorial by Elizabeth Fenske, President of the International Association for Near-Death Studies (IANDS), based on her keynote address at the First Annual IANDS Conference in Rosemont, PA, in June 1989. Dr. Fenske argues that the near-death experience, regarded as a truth by ancient religious and occult traditions, and as a challenging mystery by modern theoretical physics, can serve as a bridge between the scientific and the spiritual disciplines.

We also include in this issue two empirical studies. My own work compares the frequency of characteristic NDE elements in the near-death encounters of two groups of people: those who claim to have had NDEs, and those who deny having had such experiences. Sociologists Allan Kellehear, Patrick Heaven, and Jia Gao describe a survey of Chinese attitudes toward NDEs and NDErs; they contrast their findings with those from Kellehear and Heaven’s Australian survey published in this Journal last year.

In a further contrast to the survey of contemporary Chinese attitudes, E. J. Hermann’s review outlines the compatibility of NDErs’ attitudes with those of Taoist patriarch Chuang Tzu. This issue ends with Letters to the Editor from John White clarifying his concept of Homo noeticus, sometimes invoked by near-death researchers; and by Dan Punzak, using the analogy of the “Inner Self Helper” seen in multiple personality disorder to explain certain aspects of NDEs.

Bruce Greyson, M.D.
Editor
Guest Editorial

The Near-Death Experience: An Ancient Truth, A Modern Mystery

Elizabeth W. Fenske, Ph.D.
International Association for Near-Death Studies

ABSTRACT: The near-death experience (NDE), as an experience of wholeness, an adventure in consciousness, and a metaphoric encounter with light, links theoretical physics with the occult, the Primordial Tradition, and various religious belief systems. Light as image, vehicle, and first cause ties the NDE to mystical experience. Where science sees mystery, religion sees metaphoric truth; the NDE as spiritual quest and physical encounter beckons to both disciplines for explanation.

In any keynote address, one is caught between the desire to be all things to all people—truly to set the stage for all that follows—and the desire to raise issues that can be explored at greater depth not only while we are here together, but also in the future. If I have chosen either of these directions, it is probably the latter, because I believe the near-death experience (NDE) is part of a larger picture, one that is of enormous importance to each of us.

We come from many walks of life, with differing interests and needs; yet, all of us are concerned with the subject of the near-death experi-

Dr. Fenske is President of the International Association for Near-Death Studies, and is engaged in the private practice of psychotherapy and the integration of psychology and religion. This paper is a revised version of her keynote lecture presented at the International Association for Near-Death Studies First Annual Conference, Rosemont, PA, June 1989. Requests for reprints should be addressed to Dr. Fenske at 3310 Baring Street, Philadelphia, PA 19104.
This says something about the chord of truth that has been struck by the NDE, and it says something also about its mystery—its ability to intrigue the rational intellect and excite the deep center of the subjective, intuitive mind. Thus, our focus at this conference is the near-death experience as both ancient truth and modern mystery. In selecting this title, I sought to provide a structure within which the NDE might be considered both as it relates to science and as it touches the experiential and metaphysical realms.

In this address I will approach the NDE first as an experience of wholeness, second as an adventure in consciousness, and third as a metaphoric encounter with the essence of light. Each of these areas is associated with what might be called ancient truth, because each can chart its beginnings in humankind's spiritual search and subsequent religious expression. This is the domain of the subjective, the experiential aspect of nature and the heart.

Today, however, these same three areas of study (wholeness, consciousness, and light) are also the focus of empirical questions facing the scientific world. Where once we had a model for science based in objective reasoning and a model for religion based in faith, now the two are seen to overlap in crucial areas. While Albert Einstein, for instance, showed us mathematically the importance of perception to our concepts of time and space, mystics through the ages have reported dramatic experiences in which space and time were radically altered during moments of spiritual revelation. Since the near-death experiencer also encounters this radically altered reality, the NDE, and its related studies, may someday prove to be an aspect of the bridge between these two disciplines—science and religion. Thus, in a few years, we may discover that what we thought were separate, even competing models for science and religion have at their core the same reality, the same answer that each is seeking. If indeed these models come together at a future time, in a dimension of knowledge vastly expanded from our sense of it today, we will truly be forced to affirm, what some already believe, that spirit and matter are one.

An Experience of Wholeness

Although such an affirmation may find difficulties gaining acceptance in certain quarters today, it was once, in earlier times, an established first principle for a group of teachings known collectively as the occult. Taken literally, the word occult means hidden, and the hidden knowledge it describes pertains to certain fundamental rela-
tionships that undergird the universe. Because the pursuit of occult understanding can be easily diverted to a quest for power, the practice of occultism has drawn to it persons and activities that have marred the original intent of the studies. That intent was transformation, not personal power.

In seeking to understand the workings of the human mind, we can easily find ourselves asking questions about the beginnings of the universe—the origins of matter, the essence of mind, the evolution of the two. To some extent the current conclusions of modern science find a commonality and consistency with certain teachings in the body of work known as Esoteric Philosophy (an aspect of occult studies). Although major discrepancies exist regarding the timescale and role of superphysical forces, nonetheless, many parallels are evident. Take, for instance, the work of the Russian occultist, Helen P. Blavatsky, in her book *The Secret Doctrine* (Hanson, 1988), and compare one short section with the words of Robert Jastrow, founder and director of NASA's Goddard Institute for Space Studies, in his book *Until the Sun Dies* (1977). Then look at both these excerpts in light of a quote from Genesis. Doss McDavid, in an article that first appeared in *The Theosophical Research Journal*, December 1984, drew the analogy between Jastrow and Blavatsky. I have added the Biblical reference. McDavid's comparison appears in *H.P. Blavatsky and the Secret Doctrine* (Hanson, 1988, p. 113), and I offer a portion of it below.

**A Scientist, an Occultist and A Biblical Account**

In his book, Jastrow (1977) is speaking of the birth of the universe and the evolution of living organisms:

> Picture the radiant splendor of the moment of creation. Suddenly a world of pure energy flashes into being; light of unimaginable brightness fills the universe. (Hanson, 1988, p. 113)

Blavatsky's words also relate to a primordial moment:

> Darkness radiates light... Behold... the unparalleled refulgent glory: Bright Space, Son of Dark Space... (Hanson, 1988, p. 113)

And, in Genesis 1:3-5 (Revised Standard Version) the great epic story of creation is offered in very similar language:

> And God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness.
Like occultists, the physicists of this century have been particularly interested in fundamental relationships, and they have witnessed, in part, the disappearance of the so-called \textit{solid} world of daily perception through the advent and acceptance of two important theories: relativity, and quantum mechanics. Between them, these two theoretical approaches have altered our traditional ideas of space, time, energy and matter, as well as our belief in determinism and the independence of the observed from the observer. When scientists begin to talk of particles and subatomic particles, and to speculate on the mysterious interactions between them, they often find themselves using the language of occultists.

\textit{Three Scientists}

As we know, some physicists and scientists have been outspoken about the metaphysical implications of their current findings. Included with this group are three important figures whose work has been dedicated to uncovering the hidden order of the universe and to pointing the way toward wholeness, the experience of which is essential to each of us, both in physical terms and as spiritual reality. These three figures, Albert Einstein, David Bohm, and Rupert Sheldrake, are scientists whose work has bridged two quantum spheres. In briefly discussing their ideas, it is my intention to weave for us a web of thoughts related to an understanding of the near-death experience.

First among these scholars is the towering figure of \textit{Einstein}. A backward child who did not speak until he was four and whose marks in school were only average, Einstein spent his life in vocal support of unpopular sentiments. A pacifist in Germany during World War I, he then opposed the Nazi rise to power, and in later years became both an ardent Zionist and an advocate of nuclear arms control.

In 1905, when he was twenty-six years old, Einstein published his \textit{Special Theory of Relativity}. The same year he did his work on \textit{light quanta}. Special Relativity was postulated based on his concern over Isaac Newton's idea of absolute motion (motion that takes place in space and time). The second element in his theory came from his interest in light. John Briggs and David Peat report that as a boy Einstein was fascinated by light and believed that "if he chased a beam of light with increasing speed, in the end he would run alongside it and see a stationary ripple in the ether" (Briggs and Peat, 1984, p. 57).

In this thought we can easily see the seeds of Einstein's work with relativity and quantum mechanics. It is not, however, this work that I
want to discuss but rather his thoughts on the subjects of art, religion and science. In his book *The World As I See It* (1979), Einstein identified the highest form of religious experience as "cosmic religious feeling." Of this state he wrote:

> The individual feels the nothingness of human desires and aims and the sublimity and marvelous order which reveal themselves both in nature and in the world of thought. He looks upon an individual existence as a sort of prison and wants to experience the universe as a single significant whole. . . .

> The religious geniuses of all ages have been distinguished by this kind of religious feeling which knows no dogma and no God conceived in man's image. . . .

> In my view, it is the most important function of art and science to awaken this feeling and keep it alive in those who are capable of it. (pp. 26–27).

Because scientists usually have a deep yearning to understand, they often see concepts in terms of the universe as a whole, and Einstein (1979) maintained that:

> [the scientist's] religious feeling takes the form of a rapturous amazement at the harmony of natural law, which reveals an intelligence of such superiority that, compared with it, all the systematic thinking and acting of human beings is an utterly insignificant reflection. (pp. 28–29).

In contemplating that harmony of natural law, we might be led to the work of one of the most thrilling of contemporary physicists, *Bohm*. Born in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, Bohm had an experience similar to Einstein's involving light. As Briggs and Peat (1984, p. 57) related Bohm enjoyed, as a child, looking down from the hills on the streets and houses of this small town. Once, while gazing at the lights below, he realized that the energy from these lights extended out from the town beyond the Earth and into the universe. This light energy was like his thoughts which seemed to travel beyond where he was at a given moment.

Bohm completed his doctoral work with Robert Oppenheimer at the University of Southern California; he was then offered a position at Princeton University where he had the opportunity to meet with Einstein. For six months they discussed the nature of physical theories and the state of quantum theory. Following these conversations, Bohm
published the book *Quantum Theory* (1951), in which he advanced some of his earliest ideas on the concepts of wholeness and order.

Throughout his career, Bohm’s primary interest has been in studying “the indivisible unity of the various parts of the world,” especially as they relate to an in-depth understanding of consciousness and matter. In a later book *Wholeness and the Implicate Order* (1981), he used the term “implicate order” (from the Latin root meaning “fold inward”) to refer to any relatively independent element containing within itself the sum of all the elements.

For Bohm, consciousness includes thought, feeling, desire, and will and therefore must be comprehended in terms of an implicate order that applies to living and non-living matter as well as to consciousness. As he stated:

> If matter and consciousness could . . . be understood together, in terms of the same general notion of order, the way would be open to comprehending their relationship on the basis of some common ground. Thus we would come to the germ of a new notion of unbroken wholeness, in which consciousness is no longer to be fundamentally separated . . . (1981, p. 197)

Also relevant to this discussion is Karl Pribram’s work regarding the brain and the fact that information appears to be enfolded over the whole. Storage of this kind resembles a hologram in which the pattern of the whole is contained in the parts. Both Bohm and Pribram are very much interested in helping the world understand the order and wholeness that is behind the universe so that it can be activated in our lives and in the lives of those who will live in the coming generations.

In part the urgency of their concern relates to what happens when wholeness is not achieved. Bohm (1981) wrote that “man has sensed always that wholeness or integrity is an absolute necessity to make life worth living . . . Yet, over the ages, he has generally lived in fragmentation” (1981, p. 3). Along these same lines, Bohm also stated:

> Some might say: “fragmentation of cities, religions, political systems, conflict in the form of wars, general violence, fratricide, etc., are the reality. Wholeness is only an ideal, toward which we should perhaps strive” . . . Rather, what should be said is that wholeness is what is real and that fragmentation is the response of this whole to man’s action, guided by illusory perception, which is shaped by fragmentary thought. In other words, it is just because reality is whole that man, with his fragmentary approach, will inevitably be answered with a correspondingly fragmentary response. So what is needed is for man to give attention to his habit of fragmentary thought, to be aware of it,
and thus bring it to an end. Man's approach to reality may then be whole, and so the response will be whole. (1981, p. 7)

Lest we become too "pollyannaish" with these thoughts, we must remember that sometimes chaos also lies within the order of the universe. The same is true in human life where spiritual suffering coexists with spiritual joy. This does not, however, negate the interconnectedness of the whole in which fundamental unity stands behind all diversity.

In the work of Sheldrake, a British biologist, we find the proposal that hidden fields exist that give regular movement and shape to the universe and all therein. These fields, called "morphogenetic," form, within persons, in all systems of the body. They also form in rocks, plants and animals and move in an ascending interlocking order to the human being. Thus, for Sheldrake, the laws of nature are always evolving, and what happens in one place may affect something somewhere else.

On this point of interrelatedness, Sheldrake and Bohm agree to the extent that morphogenetic fields can be considered aspects of the implicate order. They also agree on the unity of human consciousness in which consciousness is a morphogenetic field giving a general shape to each individual consciousness, which forms its own field through memories and experiences. As each individual field resonates, it modifies the general field of human consciousness, and that, in turn, affects the present and future. Thus, the psychological, ethical and moral implications are staggering for, in reality, each individual is responsible for the whole. We can also see here the possible kinship to Carl Jung's idea of archetypes and the collective unconscious. Indeed, such theories move us easily from the realm of physics and biology to a contemplation of the human mind and consciousness.

Is there, for instance, any doubt that the human mind prefers order and simplicity to disorder and complexity? Does wholeness not produce a more harmonious feeling than fragmentation? One of the long-debated questions among scientists and non-scientists alike has concerned the order and unity in nature. As Louise Young has pointed out:

It has been argued that in searching for unity...scientists have imposed order on nature—that the order we think we have found has no objective reality. It is only a reflection of our own minds. (1986, p. 178)

Many of the discoveries of science, however, have their origin in the handiwork of nature. Rene Descartes found order in the rainbow;
Newton found the spectrum of colors there also, and in 1925 the great philosopher Alfred North Whitehead wrote these words in *Science and the Modern World*:

> There can be no living science unless there is a widespread instinctive conviction in the existence of an order of things and in particular of an order of nature. (1925, p. 4)

It is important to remember, in seeking to focus and emphasize the importance of wholeness in the universe, that we need both knowledge and insight. When we don't look or act with both knowledge and insight, we threaten the possibility for wholeness. Such is the case with the NDE in that it calls us to explore both the facts about the phenomenon itself and insights into its meaning. And only if we honor both of these activities will we understand the message of the experience, which is always a catalyst for change in the life of the experiencer. Thus, we must turn our attention to the realm of consciousness and contemplate the psyche as an inner cosmos in which the guiding principles are also orderly.

**An Adventure in Consciousness**

Much as been written and said about the need for a "recovery," an in-depth understanding, and a renewed experience of the intuitive insights of the Primordial Tradition within the major religions of the world. This Primordial Tradition does not refer to a static, cognitive doctrine or dogma that can be scientifically proven by our perfected intellect. Neither does the tradition belong to any particular religion or select group of individuals. Rather its roots are to be found deep within the psyche in what Jung called the collective unconscious of all humankind.

**The Roots of Consciousness**

Described by Jung in an overall picture of the psyche that also contains the personal unconscious and consciousness itself, the collective unconscious is a deep reservoir of ancient images, symbols, archetypes and myths common to all peoples everywhere. The importance of this well of psychic building blocks is often overlooked because its influence is difficult to trace. Collective elements almost always ap-
pear in dreams or complex reactions that are colored by personal associations or conscious intellectualizing.

The real adventure in consciousness is to experience fully and to integrate these aspects as a part of our everyday conscious life. This integrative process, at its best, also includes what I prefer to call the *sacred consciousness*, which is available to everyone. It may be that this sacred consciousness (that aspect of life which moves us toward wholeness) is never truly unconscious, for its very nature is not buried. This deep source—the "numinous," the spirit or spark of divine energy—within all individuals inspires them to holiness and wholeness. It appears that this may occur because the numinous is pure spirit (pure light energy) that can not be isolated, controlled, or monopolized by any person or set of ideas and has at its core a sense of conscience, a knowledge of right and wrong. Thus, from the action of the spiritual impulse on universally stored archetypal patterns comes the Primordial Tradition—the intuited expression of direct spiritual experience.

In addition to the Primordial Tradition, and also related to the collective unconscious, is another body of material that stands outside the codified religions of the world. It includes folklore, legends, cultural mores, and the ritual practices of indigenous peoples, many of whom have sought to live in their communities, some for the past 40,000 to 50,000 years. Among these are Native Americans, Aborigines of Australia, Maoris of New Zealand, tribal peoples of African countries, natives of South and Central America, and many others. Archaeology is now discovering much that connects us with these peoples through common symbols, signs and myths. Of particular importance to the field of near-death studies are the concepts and rituals surrounding the experience of death. Kenneth Maddock, in his book *The Australian Aborigines* (1974), noted, regarding their concept of death:

The interest Aborigines show in death is connected with their view of the person as divided between body and spirit. In life the two are united, but their permanent separation means death—in a bodily sense at least, for the spirit survives. (p. 142)

Spirit exists before birth (having entered the mother) and continues to exist after death . . . But although spirit is independent of flesh in the sense of outlasting their separation, it is thought to hang about its former home. This habit is broken through a series of ritual observances (p. 152)

Although these words do not speak directly of near-death experiences, they relate to our discussion in several ways. First, the near-
death experiencer often encounters spirits who are deceased, and such encounters are a vital part of the cultural heritage of people who are among the oldest indigenous groups known in the world today. The spirit encounter is also a part of our own cultural experience, in folklore and literature, as well as in certain of our afterlife concepts. Thus, science can say to us, and rightly so, that these experiences are a part of the collective databank available to all persons in certain altered states of consciousness. The question is how such experiences are called forth and whether beliefs actually have certain vibrations or waves or light energies that can be tapped in dreams, out-of-body experiences, the NDE, or other alternate reality experiences.

Second, although it may be important to recapture the Primordial Traditions of organized major religions, it is likewise important to recapture those beliefs and practices that have grown up, not around the teachings of certain leaders and holy men, but through the everyday personal encounters with life and death among peoples who have never been separated from the direct experience of nature. Their mystical and intuitive responses to natural phenomena represent a body of truths constellated within the psyche and presented to us through metaphor and symbol.

**Consciousness, Thought and Survival**

Thus, we begin to see that the real issue between religion (spirit) and science (matter) lies in the data of consciousness studies. It is consciousness that eludes us; it is consciousness that can not be isolated. Our difficulty is in knowing exactly what happens when one is in a state of consciousness that seems to defy the norm, or what we tend to accept as our everyday waking sense of time and space.

Walter Russell, in *The Secret of Light* (1947), proposed these thoughts on the subject:

What [man] calls his subjective mind is his consciousness, his spiritual storehouse of all-knowledge, all-power, and all-presence. That consciousness is his Self, his ETERNAL Self through which his omniscience, omnipresence and omnipotence is expressed as he slowly becomes aware of their presence within him.

... Nor does he yet know that consciousness never sleeps, never changes, for consciousness in man is his immortality. It is the LIGHT which he is unknowingly seeking ... (pp. 3-6)

It is not possible, therefore, for us today to understand the near-death experience without recognizing that we are exploring an altered state
of consciousness—that is, a state different than normal waking consciousness. Nor is it possible for us to speak of the NDE without a conscious association or thought about the phenomena of light. And it’s also important for us to understand that an altered state may operate under altered “rules,” may, in fact, operate in ways that are totally unpredictable. Take, for instance, J. H. Hacsi’s description, in The Universe That Isn’t (1985), of the world of the scientist. This is a world in which, for centuries:

the speed of light is the outside limit. Nothing can travel faster than light. According to Einstein’s predictions, if an object could reach the speed of light its length would be reduced to nothing and its mass, that is, its resistance to change of speed, would become infinite. Yet the photon, the quantum particle of electromagnetic radiation, traveling at the speed of light, far from having infinite mass is considered to have no mass at all, to be massless. (Hacsi, 1980, p. 59)

Most school children know today that the accepted velocity of light is 186,000 miles per second across “empty” space, or a vacuum. Science also tells us that a vacuum is space devoid of matter—something that really doesn’t exist on Earth, or possibly anywhere else for that matter. Much has been debated also about the wave theory and the particle theory of light. Modern science currently accepts the fact that light is a wave and a particle; that it acts at times as a particle, and that particles have associated waves.

The next question for us, recognizing the place of light in our universe and the speed with which it travels, involves the issue of thought communication as it relates to consciousness. Is it possible that thought transference, through telepathy, may travel faster than light travels? This phenomenon is not uncommon among persons who have emotional, intimate, or intense connections with each other (including identical twins, parents and their children, couples) but are spatially separated.

It is important to note here that when we raise questions involving the speed of thought, we are not talking about the speed of electric impulses as they occur within the brain where we recognize that mental activity is tied to the physical in some ways that we may as yet only partially understand. Rather, the issue concerns the transmission of thought through the air (or ether waves) from one mind to another mind. Is it possible that this transference of knowledge is instantaneous, and neither slower nor faster than the speed of light? Could it be that the speed of thought and the speed of light are the same? If so, then what might be the connections between thought waves and light waves? And do both thought and light share the common characteris-
tics of being massless? Another question this connection raises is whether we might envision or construct a universe, or other things, built on thought rather than on light—or electromagnetic radiation that reaches us as visible light.

These may seem like preposterous questions, irrelevant to life, and against belief structures; yet, they could actually be the foundation from which many questions about the near-death experience are raised by both skeptics and researchers. And it is here that we must carefully consider our methodology and our commitment to orthodoxy. Although we do need—in our studies—to apply scientific methods, pursuing each question to the next and the next, we need also to recognize that some questions can’t be followed from the stage of theory to observable fact and that we must at certain times be willing to heed the words of the Gautama Buddha, who is purported to have said to his disciples:

Believe nothing which is unreasonable, and reject nothing as unreasonable without proper investigation.

There also exists the possibility that telepathic thought does not travel from one mind to another mind but rather appears spontaneously in the appropriate mind at the appropriate time. Possibly the thoughts exist everywhere at a given time—that is, even outside the space/time continuum of the plane of existence of this planet, and are picked up by those who are affected or connected to the person/persons involved.

Given the bent of this discussion, we might now ask, Do consciousness and thought dwell within the domain of Einstein’s Theory of Relativity, as represented by the equation $E = mc^2$ (energy equals mass times the speed of light squared)? If mass can be converted into energy (and vice versa) and still the sum total of mass/energy in any system, despite various changes, is always present, then is it possible that thought itself is a form of mass/energy? If not, then the dilemma becomes, what is thought, and what is consciousness?

We know that either stimulus or the lack of it, internally or externally, causes thought. Thus, it is a physiological process in which chemical and electrical happenings in the brain set in motion the appearance of memories, symbols, images, feelings, associations and other aspects of unconscious material. Therefore, thought does not arise out of nowhere, but rather arises, apparently, out of the alive, healthy, physical brain. Another possibility exists, that thought may also arise out of the mind/consciousness beyond the brain, for if mass and energy are neither created nor destroyed, they are always present in time and space.
The essence of thought and consciousness is thus an important issue not only when we consider the way the mind functions in the universe but how or whether it survives the body's death. The near-death experience has focused for the world major questions regarding life, death, the afterlife, and survival. Within a completely scientific paradigm, proof, in these areas, is very difficult—certainly for those who remain among the living!

For the most part we have become sophisticated enough in our belief systems to recognize that the body we inhabit in this world is not the vehicle that will take us beyond the physical plane. With our current understanding of dimensions of consciousness, however, we can, to a certain degree, conceive of other bodies—astral, ethereal, or mental—that may have form but not the flesh and blood necessary for life in this atmospheric pressure. For some individuals, such ideas are beyond the realm of proven fact and therefore irrelevant. Yet, facts are difficult to come by without the ability to draw information and conclusions from experiential models. Scientifically speaking, survival, in essence, doesn't give us much to go on.

Two main assumptions regarding the survival of the soul are given to us by various religious and philosophical belief systems. One proposes that the soul, after death, resides in a specific place; the other has the soul returning to another life in another body for several possible reincarnations. Within each of these assumptions, are many possible configurations. The idea of a final resting place, for instance, may include a time of judgment, a place of abode—either Heaven or Hell, redemption by a religious figure or savior, the resurrection of the body, and a last judgment. Reincarnation, on the other hand, offers a longer or shorter stay on what may be the "astral plane," after which the soul comes once again to Earth and selects or is given a new vehicle (depending on the deeds of the past life or lives) in either the human or animal kingdom.

A third survival possibility, however, must be considered, based on a scientific understanding of the universe. If the universe is expanding, if nothing is ever lost but merely changes composition, and if the unified principle of wholeness is an option, then it may be possible that some configuration exists that we have not yet uncovered—a configuration born of oneness and interconnection. In some respects, we might say that theology, religion, psychology, cultural history, and personal need have "lobbied for" the idea of the survival of the human personality, building on this model their concepts of an afterlife and reincarnation. Perhaps it is time to see what a new model, steeped in the understanding of a holistic universe, would have to offer. In order to
develop such a model, we must take some risk, leaving behind preconceived ideas, outdated teachings, and subjective experiences.

Another important issue arises from our contemplation of the near-death and other related experiences. This is the issue of transformation and transcendence in human life. We are not, today, the Neanderthal of yesterday, and we may not be tomorrow the being we perceive ourselves to be today. The great Indian sage, Sri Aurobindo, whose work continues today in Pondicherry, India, and around the world, is one of the people of this century who has envisioned a "New Evolution." These are his words offered to us by Satprem in *On the Way to Supermanhood* (1985):

> Man is a transitional being; he is not final.
> The step from man to superman is the next approaching achievement in the earth's evolution.
> It is inevitable because it is at once the intention of the inner Spirit and the logic of Nature's process. (Satprem, 1985, p. 1).

If we are seeing shifts or expansions in consciousness today, is it inconceivable that we are only preparing the way for what is to come? Unfortunately, with civilization's advancement, technologically and culturally, we have become more and more specialized, and we feel a need to put everything in a little box and label it. Sometimes, however, out of the greatest chaos a new phoenix rises. We need to be open to this rarest of birds by not locking the cage too quickly on the interpretation of human experience, including the NDE. Let us accept what the experience offers us in terms of current scientific understanding, then step back and observe the same data with our intuitive selves. Out of the variety of human experience, one moment will transcend this place and time and speak to the future. None of us knows what that moment will be.

**A Metaphoric Encounter with the Essence of Light**

In the cosmos, both inner and outer, that we've discussed thus far, light has consistently been viewed as sacred. When the near-death experiencer is immersed in the light, he or she enters a realm of knowing that transcends the process of thinking. On this level consciousness is static and of the *one light*. There also the experiencers know they have arrived at a sacred mountain, so to speak, and are in the presence of a magnetic light in which there is absolute stillness. At
this place, the light, although it may last for only a matter of seconds, neither attracts nor repels but is all stillness, peace, and calm.

Another aspect of the light’s presence is that often it reveals its essential character to us through scenes of nature—the color, shape, and form of landscapes; trees, hills, mountains, and other pastoral images. In these scenes, NDErs often receive nature’s secrets, which are whispered to them amid the stillness and beauty. This reminds us that the Aramaic word for light is *noohra*, which also means "enlightenment" and "understanding." Biblically, in the Judaic and Christian traditions, the term *light* symbolically represented God, Yahweh, His Word, or a true teaching. Psalm 119: 105 (King James Version) states:

"Thy word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my Path."

In Genesis, light is linked with Creation. That is, on the first day of Creation, light appeared. It has been speculated that the author of Genesis was a prophet/physicist who knew, as we do today, that everything in the universe could be reduced to light, light being the essence of all matter. Today we speak of matter as gravitationally trapped light (or a form of energy) that is the source of humankind’s physical existence on Earth.

The Mystery of Light: Walter Russell and Omraam Mikhail Aivanhov

Actually, the mystery of light begins for us with the realization that light can not be seen. It is hard for us to know something that can not be seen. The same is true of air, breath, space and time—to name only a few concepts relevant to the topic of light. Light is something we live with daily but do not fully understand. Nor do we begin to comprehend its complexity. It is as if our eyes “feel” light. This is probably but a vibration or electrical wave motion that simulates the idea of light. The actual idea of light, however, can not be produced, for the waves only simulate the idea and do not actually become the idea.

We know today that when we see the light of the sun, the nerves of our eyes are feeling the intense, rapid, short wave vibration of the kind of wave motion we sense as incandescence. We are so accustomed to the idea that we see light in various intensities that it is difficult for us to accept the fact that our own senses act as mirrors to reflect various intensities of wave motion. This same phenomenon is true for darkness. We do not see darkness; rather the nerves of our eyes sense the
slowdown of motion to a rate of vibration at which we no longer feel the movement.

In any discussion of the nature and essence of light, my thoughts turn automatically to the work of two important but not widely known teachers: Walter Russell and Omraam Mikhael Aivanhov. For twenty years now I have been fascinated by the life and work of Russell. He was born on May 19, 1871, in Boston, Massachusetts, attended village school until he was nearly ten and, due to family circumstances, had to leave school to work. His first job was as a cash boy in a dry goods store for $2.50 per week. He walked six miles a day to and from work. At thirteen, he secured a church organist's position (he had been a musician since childhood), then entered art school. As Glenn Clark reported, in *The Man Who Tapped the Secrets of the Universe* (1973), Russell considered himself fortunate to have escaped the "educational systems of informational cramming and memory-testing which filled other children's lives until they were twenty-five" (Clark, 1973, p. 12).

He lived for years in New York City and made his living very credibly in variety of fine arts—music, literature, architecture, painting and sculpture. He also made discoveries in science and had an international reputation as a philosopher and lecturer in the fields of ethics, spirituality and human relations.

When asked by Clark, in a 1946 interview, "What is the great passion of your life?" Russell replied without hesitation, "Beauty . . . Beauty and worthiness to live life as a masterful interpreter of the Light" (Clark, 1973, p. 21). His own discoveries, however, caused him to see not beauty but destruction by man's hands. He foresaw two of the greatest discoveries of the 20th century—the isotopes of hydrogen, which led to the discovery of heavy water, and the two new elements used in the atomic bomb. He announced the complexity of hydrogen to a body of distinguished scientists years before the truth of his statement was verified. The two newly discovered elements that formed the base of the atomic bomb, called Neptunium and Plutonium, were published in his Charts of the Elements in 1926. He named the elements Uridium and Urium.

Much of the knowledge recorded in books by Russell (and some co-authored by his wife Lao Russell, who died in 1988) came to him during a light experience he had in May of 1921. For many days and nights he was made to write down all the things that he knew in *The Message of the Divine Iliad*, which is the record of this teaching while in the light. He said:

Thus I was made to see the universe as a whole and its simple principle of creation as one unit, repeated over and over, endlessly and
without variation, as evidenced in the universal heart-beat to which every pulsing thing in the light-wave universe is geared to act as one unit of one whole. (Clark, 1973, p. 35)

He went on to say:

No greater proof than my experience is needed to prove to the doubting world that all knowledge exists in the mind universe of Light—which is God—that all Mind is one mind, that we do not have separate minds, and that all knowledge can be obtained from the Universal Source of All Knowledge by becoming ONE with that Source. (Clark, 1973, p. 36)

These thoughts are echoed in the work of Aivanhov (1900–1986), a Bulgarian spiritual teacher, who moved to France in 1937. In his book, Light is Living Spirit (1987), Aivanhov discussed the two Bulgarian words for light:

... svetlina, the physical light that we can see, and videlina, the spiritual, primeval light created by God on the first day, when he said, 'let there be light!' It was only on the fourth day when God created the Sun and Moon and Stars, that svetlina appeared as a more material manifestation of videlina. And the Sun—which is not a ball of fire as most people think, but a living conscious entity—the sun receives the subtle invisible light, videlina, and transforms it into visible light, svetlina, thanks to which it shines for the whole universe. It is this quintessence of light, videlina that is so powerful. (Aivanhov, 1987, p. 142)

It has been said that light is everywhere in space, even in Black Holes; although it permeates everything, however, we are unable to see it because of our undeveloped spiritual faculties. Is this what the aura is all about? The ancients tell us that if we concentrate on light enough, we feel it, we attract it, and it begins to penetrate us and change us. It is the light that restores us to complete harmony; it is the light that heals us, and light is the breath (the prana) we breathe. Isn't that the real secret of life, that the breath we breathe—the light—ignites the machines we call our bodies?

Today, we have also been told that ancient civilizations, such as the one called Atlantis, used to collect and condense the light of the Sun by means of huge crystals. It is believed that this energy was then used to run instruments and machines.

The Laser, The Hero's Quest, and the NDE

In the early 1960s, American physicist Theodor Marman developed the technique of the laser. The term LASER is formed from the first
letters of the words "light amplification by stimulated emission of radiation." The laser is light that is concentrated into a single beam of tremendous power that can be used to perform many different extraordinary operations. In an ordinary light beam the rays go off in all directions, but the laser produces one intensely concentrated, undiffused beam of "coherent" light flowing in one direction with all its waves of the same wavelength—thus, monochromatic. These unique characteristics make it an invaluable instrument. For instance, in military projects it is able to pulverize spatial ships at a great distance. It can measure the altitude of approaching aircraft, and it can locate the position of an enemy through all intervening obstacles. From the laser, in effect, there is no hiding place.

In addition to their military uses, lasers drill holes in diamonds, weld the retina of an eye to its support, perform surgery on parts of single cells, and slice through huge piles of thick materials. Who knows, perhaps this is the secret that helped the Egyptians cut and build the pyramids in the land of the Sun.

Allan Maurer, in his book *Lasers: the Light Wave of the Future* (1982), ended with these words:

Entirely new and radically different kinds of lasers will probably appear—and as our knowledge of light and matter grows, lasers will make practical what can barely be done today and make possible what is not yet even dreamed of.

Is it possible that in the future nothing will be more important than exploring light? Is it possible that this light—the laser—is in reality, like the soul, the spark of the sacred within everything, and is it possible that this is what the search for consciousness is all about? Is the mysterious light of the NDE a laser to the self—a soul in another dimension of consciousness? Or, is it a fragment of the consciousness of the human brain/mind?

On a symbolic level, what we see in the NDE, when we look specifically at its "story" or narrative framework, may be thought of as a journey or spiritual quest. The quest motif, identified by Joseph Campbell in his book *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* (1949) is a pattern common to all mythologies, all literatures, and all stories, no matter how simple or how complex. As distilled by Campbell, the journey focuses on a hero (man or woman) who is called to adventure, receives supernatural aid, crosses the threshold to another world, pursues the road of trials, earns the ultimate boon, and returns to the old reality
(often unwillingly) a changed person who then must reconcile what has been "revealed" with what exists.

In the NDE, the revelatory moments are generally surrounded by light. If we think about it, revelation is always an experience of light. It is the light that "dawns" in any situation to show us the true nature of things—the connections that exist and the direction demanded by those connections. Revelation, therefore, is always the goal for the hero/experiencer. Mythologically speaking it is the god-energy, the spark of divinity at the center of the maze; psychologically, it is the hero's momentous meeting with his or her own androgynous self, and historically or sociologically, it is the gift brought back from the journey to enlighten the world.

This is not to say that revelation is always a pleasant or sought after experience; the light of God can be fatal to look upon. It is, however, a necessary encounter for growth and transformation in the life of any individual. While the hero/experiencer may refuse the call to the quest, no one comes back unchanged from the journey. Yet, revelation is not a pure experience of the divine. It is always filtered through the personality, the mind, and the brain that experience it, and the change that is wrought is a change in the fundamental emotional structure of the individual.

What then is the nature of this change? Basically, it is a response to the essence of revelation—to the connections uncovered by that brilliant, all-embracing light—and those connections are both personal and universal. They are personal in that they show, often in the form of a life review, the effects of action and decision on past and immediate circumstances; they are universal in that they open the individual spirit to ultimate truth and move the heart to compassion. Listen to Campbell's description of the hero at the moment of revelation and choice:

Turning his regard from the inner sphere of thought-transcending truth . . . outward again to the phenomenal world, he perceives without the same ocean of being he found within . . . And he is filled with compassion for the self-terrorized beings who live in fright of their own nightmare. He rises, returns to them and dwells with them as an egoless center. (Campbell, 1949, pp. 165–166)

And although for the near-death experiencer, the great spiritual truth that is learned may lie beyond the realm of the spoken word, the compassion that floods the heart will change the way the person lives from that day forward.
Conclusion

Experiences involving the nature of light, like the NDE, may one day lead us to the spiritual realm (the unknown we've called God) by methods and standards that can be acceptable to both science and religion. But only when the spiritual foundation is laid can science and religion, the two disciplines of greatest concern to the civilization of planet Earth, hope to find a unity, effect a marriage, and share a life together.

If this marriage takes place, all human relationships and every compartment of life will function in a more balanced way because we will have greater knowledge of the universal law that lies behind our many-faceted, vibrating, electric wave universe. Through our study of the NDE, we have the opportunity to touch this universal law by participating in an experience of wholeness, by rediscovering our sacred consciousness through an exploration of the mind, and by experiencing light as a metaphor for spiritual truth. These encounters are fundamental to our sense of who we are and where we're going.

Thus, as we contemplate the very important questions raised by the NDE, let us look at these issues in the light of evolutionary history. Scientists tell us there have been generations of stars. As some were born, others died, and through this cycle the synthesis leading to life came about. This creative work is now twenty billion years old, and some believe that Homo sapiens has walked the earth for only a hundred thousand of those years. This alone should give us pause!

As we leave here, pondering seriously all the answers we do not have, may we not ponder so seriously that we forget to enjoy ourselves and each other in this great game we play called life. In the words of the immortal bard:

Our revels now are ended. These our actors,
As I foretold you, were all spirits, and
Are melted into air, into thin air;
And, like the baseless fabric of this vision,
The cloud-capped towers, the gorgeous palaces,
The solemn temples, the great globe itself;
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve,
And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,
Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff
As dreams are made on, and our little lives
Are rounded in a sleep.

William Shakespeare
The Tempest, Act IV, Sc. 1
References

Near-Death Encounters With and Without Near-Death Experiences: Comparative NDE Scale Profiles

Bruce Greyson, M.D.
University of Connecticut

ABSTRACT: In a retrospective study contrasting the near-death encounters of 183 persons who reported near-death experiences and 63 persons who reported no near-death experience, the two groups did not differ in age, gender, or time elapsed since the near-death encounter. Near-death experiencers reported all 16 items of the NDE Scale significantly more often than did nonexperiencers.

Near-death experiences (NDEs), profound subjective events often experienced on the threshold of death, have received increased attention from scientists and clinicians in recent years (Lundahl, 1982; Greyson and Flynn, 1984; Rogo, 1989). While their frequent occurrence and their significance for the individual experiencer are no longer in question, controversy remains over the causes of these experiences and their ultimate meaning.

In order to establish reliable criteria for the occurrence and amplitude of NDEs, I developed a quantitative NDE Scale (Greyson, 1983). That 16-item scale can be used by researchers to explore the association between NDEs and hypothesized causal factors and aftereffects; and it can be used by clinicians to differentiate NDEs from other

Dr. Greyson is Associate Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Connecticut School of Medicine, and Director of the Inpatient Psychiatry Service at the John Dempsey Hospital. Requests for reprints should be addressed to Dr. Greyson at the Department of Psychiatry, University of Connecticut Health Center, Farmington, CT 06032.
reactions to a near-death encounter, such as organic brain disorders and other stress responses. The NDE Scale has been shown to be both reliable and valid, and provides measures of “depth” of the NDE and of four components of the experience: Cognitive, Affective, Paranormal, and Transcendental (Greyson, 1983).

The NDE Scale is also useful in categorizing NDEs into discrete types (Greyson, 1985), based on whether the Cognitive, Affective, Paranormal, or Transcendental Component features are most prominent. Since different types of NDE may result from different mechanisms and may produce different aftereffects, they are worth distinguishing.

While the NDE Scale has been shown to be reliable, valid, and useful for clinical and research purposes, its specificity has never been established by studying the scores of individuals who do not report NDEs in a near-death encounter. The present study was undertaken to contrast the near-death encounters of persons who claimed to have had NDEs with those of persons who denied having had NDEs.

Method

Subjects

Subjects were recruited through advertisements in the newsletter of the International Association for Near-Death Studies, an organization founded to promote research into NDEs. Individuals responding to requests for subjects willing to complete questionnaires about their close brushes with death included 183 persons who claimed to have had NDEs (hereinafter called NDErs) and 63 persons who denied having had NDEs during their near-death encounters (hereinafter called nonNDErs).

NDE Scale

The 246 subjects in this study were mailed a modified version of the 16-item multiple-choice NDE Scale described elsewhere (Greyson, 1983), which quantifies the NDE and its Cognitive, Affective, Paranormal, and Transcendental Components (Greyson, 1985). The single modification was a rewording of the response alternatives for the first item, time distortion.
In the original NDE Scale, possible responses to this question, "Did time seem to speed up?", included the following:

1. No.
2. Time seemed to go faster than usual.
3. Everything seemed to be happening all at once.

Subsequent experience with the NDE Scale suggested that the characteristic distortion in the sense of time in which more events than usual occur in a unit of subjective time might be described by some subjects as time seeming to go faster, and by other subjects as time seeming to go slower, depending on whether they interpreted "time" as the flow of events or as a constant against which those events are measured. Furthermore, many near-death experiencers (NDErs) find the question of time distortion unanswerable because they lost any sense of time during the experience. For these reasons, the possible responses to this question were expanded to read as follows:

1. No.
2. Time seemed to go faster than usual, or slower.
3. Everything seemed to be happening all at once; or time stopped, or lost all meaning.

With that one modification, the NDE Scale yielded a total score of 0–32 points (0, 1, or 2 points for each of the 16 items). For research purposes, a score of 7 or higher (one standard deviation below the mean of 15) has been found to be an appropriate criterion for defining an NDE (Greyson, 1983).

Each of the four component subscales yielded a score of 0–8 points (0, 1, or 2 points for each of 4 items). The Cognitive Component was derived from items 1–4; the Affective Component, items 5–8; the Paranormal Component, items 9–12; and the Transcendental Component, items 13–16.

Cognitive NDEs were defined as those experiences that scored 5 or higher on the Cognitive Component, regardless of the scores on any other component. Transcendental NDEs were defined as those that scored 5 or higher on the Transcendental Component, but less than 5 on the Cognitive Component. Affective NDEs were defined as those that scored 5 or higher on the Affective Component, but less than 5 on either the Cognitive or Transcendental Component. Paranormal NDEs were defined as those that scored 5 or higher on the Paranormal Component, but less than 5 on any other component.
Statistical Analyses

Gender ratios of the NDEr and nonNDEr groups were compared with the chi-squared test. Respondents' age at the time of the near-death event, and years elapsed since the near-death event, were compared between the two groups with Student's t test.

Mean scores of the NDEr and nonNDEr groups were compared on the total NDE Scale and on the four Component subscales with Student's t test. In addition, the comparative distribution of scores (0, 1, or 2) on each item was compared between the NDEr and nonNDEr groups with the chi-squared test.

Numbers of experiences reported by NDErs and nonNDErs that met criteria for research definitions of NDEs and of Cognitive, Affective, Paranormal, and Transcendental NDEs were compared with chi-squared tests.

Results

Gender and Ages of NDErs and NonNDErs

Of the 183 NDErs, 69 (38%) were male and 114 (62%) female; of the 63 nonNDErs, 29 (46%) were male and 34 (54%) female. These gender ratios were not significantly different between the two groups (chi-squared = 1.03; df = 1).

The mean age at the time of the near-death event was 32.5 years (S.D. = 15.3) for NDErs and 30.5 years (S.D. = 16.7) for nonNDErs. This age difference between the two groups was not significant (t = 0.89; df = 244).

The mean length of time elapsed since the near-death event was 18.1 years (S.D. = 14.7) for NDErs and 22.3 years (S.D. = 16.4) for nonNDErs. This difference between the two groups in elapsed time since the near-death event was also not significant (t = 1.90; df = 244).

NDE Scale Scores and NDE Component Scores of NDErs and nonNDErs

The mean NDE Scale score of the 183 NDErs was 16.48 (S.D. = 6.96), while that of the 63 nonNDErs was 3.79 (S.D. = 4.08). This difference was significant at p < .0001 (t = 13.7; df = 244).
The NDE Scale also produced subscale scores for four discrete components of the NDE. The mean score for the Cognitive Component was 3.59 (S.D. = 2.18) for NDErs and 1.13 (S.D. = 1.40) for nonNDErs; this difference was significant at p < .0001 (t = 8.39; df = 244). The mean score for the Affective Component was 5.54 (S.D. = 2.46) for NDErs and 1.51 (S.D. = 2.04) for nonNDErs; this difference was also significant at p < .0001 (t = 11.70; df = 244). The mean score for the Paranormal Component was 3.25 (S. D. = 2.02) for NDErs and 0.79 (S.D. = 1.17) for nonNDErs; this difference, like those above, was also significant at p < .0001 (t = 9.16; df = 244). Finally, the mean score for the Transcendental Component was 4.11 (S.D. = 2.52) for NDErs and 0.37 (S.D. = 0.83) for nonNDErs; this difference, like those for the other components, was significant at p < .0001 (t = 13.67; df = 244).

Although each of these four component scores yielded NDEr/nonNDEr differences significant at the level of p < .0001, that value overestimates their significance, since the four components are not statistically independent. Using the Bonferroni procedure to correct for the interdependence of these four t tests (Grove and Andreasen, 1982) yields a more accurate estimate of p = .0004 for the level of significance for each of these tests independently.

**NDE Scale Items Endorsed by NDErs and NonNDErs**

The 16 individual items that comprise the NDE Scale are listed in Table 1, along with the percent of NDErs and nonNDErs who endorsed each of the three alternative responses to each item, and chi-squared tests of the differences between the NDErs and the nonNDErs. Since tests on these 16 items are not statistically independent from each other, the Bonferroni correction was again used to estimate the significance of the calculated chi-squared values.

The corrected level of significance was p < .005 for 12 of the 16 chi-squared values, p < .01 for two more of the chi-squared values, and p < .025 for the remaining two values. Each of the 16 NDE Scale items therefore differentiated the NDErs from the nonNDErs at a significant level, even with the rigorous Bonferroni correction.

**Number and Types of NDEs Described by NDErs and NonNDErs**

Of the 183 respondents who claimed to have had NDEs, 169 (92%) described experiences that scored 7 or higher on the NDE Scale, while
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NDE Scale item</th>
<th>NDErs (n = 183)</th>
<th>nonNDErs (n = 63)</th>
<th>chi-squared (df = 2)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Did time seem to speed up?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. No.</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>51.29***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Time seemed to go faster than usual, or slower.</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Everything seemed to be happening all at once; or time stopped, or lost all meaning.</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Were your thoughts speeded up?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. No.</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>15.06**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Faster than usual.</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Incredibly fast.</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did scenes from your past come back to you?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. No.</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>97%</td>
<td>15.27**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Remembered many past events.</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Past flashed before me, out of my control.</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did you suddenly seem to understand everything?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. No.</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>86%</td>
<td>30.28***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. About myself or others.</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. About the universe.</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did you have a feeling of peace or pleasantness?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. No.</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>83.48***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Relief or calmness.</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Incredible peace or pleasantness.</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did you have a feeling of joy?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. No.</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>54.44***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Happiness.</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NDE Scale item</td>
<td>NDErs ($n = 183$)</td>
<td>nonNDErs ($n = 63$)</td>
<td>chi-squared ($df = 2$)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------</td>
<td>------------------</td>
<td>---------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Incredible joy.</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>52.64***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Did you feel a sense of harmony or unity with the universe?
1. No. | 22% | 73% |
2. No longer in conflict with nature. | 23% | 10% |
3. United, one with the world. | 55% | 17% |

Did you see or feel surrounded by a brilliant light?
1. No. | 28% | 94% |
2. Unusually bright light. | 26% | 6% |
3. Light clearly of mystical or otherworldly origin. | 46% | 0% |

Were your senses more vivid than usual?
1. No. | 34% | 70% |
2. More so than usual. | 26% | 17% |
3. Incredibly more so. | 40% | 13% |

Did you seem to be aware of things going on elsewhere, as if by ESP?
1. No. | 66% | 88% |
2. Yes, but facts not yet corroborated. | 20% | 10% |
3. Yes, and facts later corroborated. | 14% | 2% |

Did scenes from the future come to you?
1. No. | 80% | 98% |
2. From personal future. | 9% | 0% |
3. From the world's future. | 11% | 2% |

Did you feel separated from your physical body?
1. No. | 14% | 83% |

101.72***
Table 1 (cont.)
Percent of NDErs and nonNDErs who endorsed NDE Scale item responses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NDE Scale item</th>
<th>NDErs (n = 183)</th>
<th>nonNDErs (n = 63)</th>
<th>chi-squared (df = 2)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2. Lost awareness of body.</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Clearly left the body and existed outside it.</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did you seem to enter some other, unearthly world?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>86.03***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. No.</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>88%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Unfamiliar, strange place.</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Clearly mystical or unearthly realm.</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did you seem to encounter a mystical presence or being?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>55.48***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. No.</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>95%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Unidentifiable voice.</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Definite being, or voice clearly of mystical or other worldly origin.</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did you see deceased spirits or religious figures?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>22.63***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. No.</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>94%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Sensed their presence.</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Saw them.</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did you come to a border or point of no return?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>67.21***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. No.</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Conscious decision to &quot;return&quot; to life.</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Barrier I was not permitted to cross; or &quot;sent back&quot; to life involuntarily.</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*** p < .0001; with Bonferroni correction, p. < .005
** p = .0005; with Bonferroni correction, p. < .01
* p ≤ .0015; with Bonferroni correction, p. < .025
14 (8%) described experiences that fell below the research criterion of 7 for the definition of an NDE. Of the 63 respondents who denied having had NDEs during their close brushes with death, 18 (29%) nevertheless described experiences that scored 7 or higher on the NDE Scale despite their denials, while 45 (71%) described experiences that fell below the research criterion of 7 for the definition of an NDE. This difference between the two groups was significant at \( p < .0001 \) (chi-squared = 104.57; df = 1).

Among the 183 self-described NDErs, 61 (33%) described experiences that were classified as Cognitive NDEs, 42 (23%) described Affective NDEs, 5 (3%) described Paranormal NDEs, 43 (24%) described Transcendental NDEs, and the remaining 32 (18%) described experiences that did not meet criteria for any of those classifications. Among the 63 self-described nonNDErs, 1 (2%) described an experience that was classified as a Cognitive NDE, 8 (13%) described Affective NDEs, 1 (2%) described a Paranormal NDE, none described a Transcendental NDE, and the remaining 53 (84%) described experiences that did not meet criteria for any of those classifications. The difference in distribution of NDE types among self-described NDErs and self-described nonNDErs was significant at \( p < .0001 \) (chi-squared = 96.45; df = 4).

Discussion

Since subjects in this study volunteered from the ranks of an organization dedicated to near-death research, it may be presumed that they had greater interest in and knowledge of NDEs than would the general population. While there is some evidence that knowledge of NDEs does not influence reports of personal experiences (Greyson and Stevenson, 1980), it would be worthwhile to repeat this study with a random sample of individuals who have come close to death.

Regardless of how representative these subjects are of near-death survivors in general, the group of self-described NDErs and the group of self-described nonNDErs were indistinguishable in terms of gender, age at the time of the near-death event, or years elapsed since the near-death event. These data support previous findings that NDE reports are not associated with gender, age, or elapsed time since the near-death event (Ring, 1980, 1984; Greyson, 1983, 1986).

The mean NDE Scale score of 16.48 (S.D. = 6.96) for NDErs in the present study is slightly higher than the mean score of 15.01 (S.D. = 7.84) for the sample of NDErs on which the scale was originally tested (Greyson, 1983). This difference is attributable to the new wording of
the response options to the question about time distortion, which was expected to elicit more positive responses than the original wording. Accordingly, NDErs in the present study scored higher on the Cognitive Component, which includes time distortion, (mean = 3.59) than did NDErs in the original study (mean = 2.35); whereas their mean scores on the other three components were almost identical to those of the original sample of NDErs (Greyson, 1983). Likewise, percentages of NDErs choosing each of the three response options to NDE Scale items are very close to those reported from the original description of the scale (Greyson, 1983) for all individual items except time distortion.

Percentages of positive responses to all 16 items on the NDE Scale, as well as scores on the total scale and the four component subscales, were much higher for the NDErs in this study than for the nonNDErs. Even with the Bonferroni correction for multiple simultaneous statistical tests, every comparison between the two groups reached statistical significance. Nevertheless, it is notable that over a quarter of the nonNDErs gave at least a mildly positive response to questions about time distortion; feelings of peace, joy, and cosmic unity; and unusually vivid senses during their close brushes with death. Those items might therefore be regarded not as features unique to the NDE but as less specific responses to a near-death encounter.

An alternative interpretation of the presence of those NDE features in self-described nonNDErs is that some of those “nonNDErs” did in fact have NDEs, despite their denials. Over a quarter of these respondents who denied having had NDEs did indeed describe experiences that scored 7 or higher on the NDE Scale, meeting the research criterion for an NDE. Why those subjects chose not to regard their experiences as NDEs, and how their experiences compared with those of the subjects who did claim to have had NDEs, are intriguing questions that deserve further study.

Conversely, a few respondents who claimed to have had NDEs described experiences that scored lower than 7 on the NDE Scale, not meeting the research criterion for an NDE. Though they accounted for only eight percent of the self-described NDErs, their reasons for regarding their experiences as NDEs deserve further study, as does a phenomenological comparison of their experiences with those of respondents who did not claim to have had NDEs.

Roughly one third of the experiences reported by NDErs met criteria for Cognitive NDEs, and roughly one quarter each met criteria for Affective and Transcendental NDEs. This represents a somewhat higher proportion of Cognitive NDEs than reported previously (Grey-
son, 1985); that difference may be attributable to the rewording of the time distortion item, which, as noted above, increased scores on the Cognitive Component. A small number of experiences in the present sample could be classified as Paranormal NDEs, a type not found in the earlier study of NDE typology (Greyson, 1985); and 18 percent of NDErs' experiences could not be classified as to type.

It should be noted that it is possible for an experience to score 7 or higher on the total NDE Scale, qualifying as an NDE, and yet score less than 5 on any given component. Conversely, it is also possible, though rare, for an experience to score less than 7 on the total scale, not qualifying as an NDE, and yet still score 5 or 6 on a single component.

Only 10 of the 63 nonNDErs reported experiences that could be classified as a particular type of NDE, and 8 of those were categorized as Affective NDEs. As noted above, feelings of peace, joy, and cosmic unity—elements of the Affective Component—were reported not uncommonly by nonNDErs. Further research is warranted into whether these affective elements are indeed diagnostic of NDEs or whether they are nonspecific responses to a close brush with death. The respondents themselves were less likely to identify affective experiences as NDEs than they were to identify cognitive or transcendental experiences as NDEs.

References

Community Attitudes Toward Near-Death Experiences: A Chinese Study

Allan Kellehear, Ph.D.
La Trobe University

Patrick Heaven, Ph.D.
Charles Sturt University-Riverina

Jia Gao, B.A.
The People's University of China

ABSTRACT: In a survey of Chinese attitudes toward near-death experiences (NDEs), 197 respondents were read a hypothetical description of an NDE and asked to choose from a range of explanations and social reactions that might approximate their own. Fifty-eight percent of respondents believed that NDEs were probably hallucinations or dreams. Less than nine percent believed the NDE was evidence of life after death. Rural and younger persons were more likely to react positively to NDEs. The results are discussed with reference to an earlier Australian study by Kellehear and Heaven (1989).

In this paper we examine the attitudes toward near-death experiences (NDEs) of a sample of people from China (N = 197). To do this we replicated an earlier study by Allan Kellehear and Patrick Heaven (1989). We posed the following questions: What are Chinese attitudes...
to the NDE? What demographic variables might influence these attitudes? Approximately what proportion of Chinese are familiar with media reports of NDEs? How many Chinese have had experiences similar to an NDE? These questions are necessarily preliminary questions because they reflect the current early state of academic enquiries about non-Western NDEs in general, and Chinese studies of the NDE in particular.

Near-death studies in non-Western countries have been few. Most of these reflect an interest in content analysis of the NDE. For example, Satwant Pasricha and Ian Stevenson (1986) examined Indian accounts of NDEs and Dorothy Counts (1983) examined Melanesian experiences. Both studies attempted to understand the role of culture in influencing the content of an NDE. Henry Abramovitch (1988) documented an Israeli example of personal confusion when an NDE and the NDEr's cultural expectations did not match.

These studies are important but early attempts to explore the role of culture in influencing the NDE. Like their Western counterparts, these studies do not examine other sociological issues such as community attitudes and the general incidence of NDEs. There are no attempts to formally measure public knowledge and explanations of the NDE. In this context, China is a good example of our limited knowledge of these areas.

Contemporary information about NDEs in China is scarce. An early historical paper by Carl Becker (1981) argued that the NDE was probably central to the development of Pure Land Buddhism in China. However, details of this experience are very general. Becker documented how a few key religious figures in the early development of Chinese Buddhism, after recovering from grave illness, reported visits to the "Pure Land." Later, these men appeared to make radical shifts in their values. In a later paper, Becker (1984) reviewed other accounts of deathbed visions, which included those of monks and laypersons. He observed that many of these contained most of the features of NDEs that we have come to know in the West, such as the tunnel experience, meeting a bright light, encountering other environments, and a life review. Aside from the admiring responses of a few there does not appear to be any documentation of societal attitudes to these claims. Contemporary attitudes to these types of experiences are not documented.

In the present study, we described a variety of features of the NDE to a sample of Chinese people and assessed their attitude to these. We wanted indications of how they might explain NDEs, and how they might react to those who claim to have had such experiences. We also wanted some indication of the extent to which reports of NDEs have reached (or are being generated in) China.
The results of this attitude study are useful for what they may tell us about culture-specific attitudes. In other words, they can alert us to local cultural influences that promote particular national views. But these findings can also help determine whether attitudes in different countries may be connected with particular social circumstances rather than cultural differences. This is not simply an academic anthropological exercise. These studies also have practical implications for helping professionals, especially those working with NDErs from other cultures.

Method

Sample

Undergraduate students from the People's University of China were asked to administer the questionnaires. Two thirds of the students were instructed to visit rural areas around Beijing while the remainder was asked to survey Beijing itself. They were advised not to survey other students, that all respondents should be more than eighteen years of age, and that they should strive to sample as widely as possible with respect to age and occupation. The resulting sample is probably not representative of China, a country that is a predominantly rural peasant nation. Nevertheless, we believe the sample to be diverse enough for preliminary observations.

Responses were received from 197 respondents (99 males and 98 females). Of those, 32 respondents were aged between 18 and 25 years, 78 respondents were between 26 and 40 years, 72 respondents were between 41 and 60 years, and 15 were older than 60 years of age. In educational terms, 19 respondents had received no schooling, 31 respondents had attended lower primary school, 20 respondents had attended higher primary, 54 had reached middle school, 31 had attended high school and 35 had received a university education. There were 7 missing data. These education categories are Chinese national terms of reference. One hundred and thirty-three respondents gave their usual residence as "rural" and sixty-four claimed to reside in the city.

Questionnaire

The design of the questionnaire follows closely that developed by Kellehear and Heaven (1989). This instrument has four sections. The first section solicits basic demographic data and the last section
quizzes respondents on their familiarity with NDEs from media, press and personal sources. The second section begins with a vignette description of a typical NDE that contains five main elements: tunnel sensation, out-of-body experience, meeting deceased acquaintances, meeting a bright light, and experiencing a life review. Questionnaires were divided into two types. Either the vignette portrayed "a relative" or simply "someone you know." Respondents were then asked to select from a range of explanations which best approximates their own. This list appears in Table 1.

The third section presents a further list of statements representing a range of attitudes to a person recalling his or her NDE. These included positive statements (e.g., "I would encourage discussion of his/her feelings whatever these might be"), negative statements (e.g., "I would visit this person less often") and neutral statements (e.g., "My reaction would depend on this person's reaction to the experience"). This list appears in Table 2. The logic and testing details of this design were described in the earlier study (Kellehear and Heaven, 1989).

There were several minor but necessary modifications to the earlier survey instrument. We did not ask questions that might appear ambiguous or troublesome in the context of the nation's political system. We therefore did not ask respondents their occupation or religion. The section devoted to explanations includes an extra item that invites respondents' explanations should they be dissatisfied with the ones offered. This was aimed at capturing categories of explanation that may be culturally unknown to us and therefore unanticipated. Finally, because the original survey instrument appeared in English, the ques-

Table 1
Responses to explanations for NDEs (N = 197)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Explanation</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. It was a passing hallucination.</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>38.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. It was a dream.</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>19.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. It was the beginning of a mental illness.</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. It was the side effect of medical drugs/techniques.</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. It was possible evidence of life after death.</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>8.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. It was the product of a vivid imagination.</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>8.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. I don't know how to explain it.</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>12.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Other explanations.</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2

Possible reactions to a person describing an NDE

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>I would try to change the subject. [-]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>I would seek professional advice before deciding how to respond. [0]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>I would be openly fascinated and interested. [+1]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>I would humor this person until the delusion had passed. [-]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>My reaction would depend on this person's reaction to the experience. [0]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>I would reassure them that this did not lessen my regard for them. [+1]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>I would be suspicious of this person's motives. [-]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>I would explore with them the variety of possible explanations for this experience. [+1]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>I would visit this person less often. [-]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>I would take a &quot;wait and see&quot; attitude. [0]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>I would be puzzled by the story and tell them so. [0]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>I would encourage discussion of his/her feelings whatever these might be. [+1]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Positive reactions denoted by [+], negative reactions denoted by [-] and neutral reactions denoted by [0].

The questionnaire was translated into Chinese. This was then translated back into English by someone outside the research group, to check the accuracy of the translation. One methodological question remains: how culture bound is our NDE vignette? This is an interesting question.

Several points support our use of the NDE vignette used in this study. First, in the absence of contemporary Chinese accounts of NDEs, it would not be unreasonable to assume that several important features of Western NDEs might overlap with Chinese ones, even if other features appeared strange or foreign. Nonetheless, we are unable to say which features are particularly Western and which of those, if any, are not. Therefore, since it is not possible to judge whether the instrument is or is not culture bound, we include all the main elements as we know them.

Second, Becker's (1984) review of early Japanese and Chinese deathbed visions does suggest that many of these features may also be culturally relevant to these parts of the world. This evidence tends to favor the survey vignette.
Finally, many people who experience an NDE in the West do not fully experience all the features described in our "ideal" vignette. This does not mean that the core elements of our NDE vignette are culturally or personally irrelevant to these Westerners. Many Western NDErs, and many Indian or Melanesian NDErs, may relate to only one or two of these features but that does not mean they cannot recognize their experience in our vignette. Consequently, we do not think that the survey vignette is overly culture bound for any Chinese respondents who may be NDErs, or for those who may have heard accounts of NDEs in that country.

**Procedure**

The study was conducted in April, 1989 (only weeks before the Tiananmen Square massacre in Beijing). Each respondent was approached by a student who then read the questionnaire to the respondent. This procedure was adopted to overcome any literacy problems that might arise, particularly for rural peasants. In the study, 103 respondents received a questionnaire referring to "someone you know," while 94 received a questionnaire referring to "a relative."

**Results**

Respondents were asked to select the explanation that best explained the vignette for them. The percentage of all respondents ("someone you know" and "relative" vignettes) selecting each explanation is shown in Table 1.

The most noteworthy result was that 38.9% of respondents selected hallucination as their explanation. The second most popular explanation, chosen by 19.2% of respondents, was that NDEs are dreams. All other categories of explanation received only minor support, from between 3 to 9%, with the exception of the "Don't know" option, which was selected by 12.1% of respondents. It is also interesting to note that only 5 respondents (2.5%) chose to ignore the listed explanations, preferring instead to offer their own. These latter explanations included the following views: NDEs are ideational material from the mind's unconscious; they are side effects of illness; and NDEs are indication of serious brain disorder. One person declared the NDE account to be "sheer nonsense" and another respondent felt the account to be literally true and not in need of any other explanation. Overall,
however, it seems that most respondents (58.1%) favored the hallucination or dream explanation.

Respondents were also asked to select four statements that might best describe their reaction to a person recounting the experience to them. Only 145 respondents complied with the instructions for this section. More specifically, 62 "relative" and 83 "someone you know" surveys were usable for this part of the analysis. Other respondents chose one or two statements instead of the required four and were therefore not included in the analysis. The statements for this section of the survey are shown in Table 2. Negative statements were scored 0, neutral statements 1, and positive statements 2. Thus, a maximum score of 8 indicates a most supportive and facilitative response by a person. A Minimum score of 0 indicates a rejecting and dismissive attitude. Scores of 3, 4 or 5 indicate a more neutral, reflective and cautious attitude. The mean score for the "Someone you know" group was 4.6 (SD = 1.90) while that for the "relative" group was 4.7 (SD = 1.53) (t = 0.45, df = 143, n.s.). As there was no significant difference in attitude to NDE, both groups were combined for further analysis.

Linear correlations were obtained between scores obtained in Table 2 and the demographic variables. These correlations are presented in Table 3. The correlations indicate that positive reactions to NDErs were significantly correlated with age (r = -.16, P < .01) and residence, in this case rural areas (r = -15, P < .05). In other words, younger people and those who reside in rural areas were more likely to react positively towards those who claim to have had an NDE.

Other frequency data of interest indicate that 31% of respondents were familiar with the NDE from newspapers, books or magazines and 24% from television, radio or movies. And 13% of our Chinese sample of respondents claimed to have had an experience "similar to the one described by this survey." However, only 6 of those 26 respondents

| Table 3 |
| Linear correlations between positive reactions and demographic variables (N = 145) |
| Variable | r | p |
| Gender | .08 | n.s. |
| Age | -.16 | < .01 |
| Rural vs. urban residence | -.15 | < .05 |
| Education | .07 | n.s. |
| Belief in life after death | .01 | n.s. |
chose to explain the vignette as "evidence of life after death." The main explanations favored even by this group remained medical and psychological.

Discussion

The most interesting finding of this study is the observation that more than half the sample (58.1%) believed that NDEs are either hallucinations or dreams. Only 8.6% believed that NDEs could be "evidence of life after death." This is the opposite result obtained by Kellehear and Heaven (1989) when surveying Australians. In that Australian survey, 57.8% of the sample believed that NDEs were evidence of life after death, while only 15% believed the experiences could be explained as dreams or hallucinations.

Of further comparative interest are the mean scores for attitudes to an NDEr in the two studies. In this study the mean score for Chinese attitudes to someone recounting an NDE was 4.8. In the Australian study, the mean was 6.15. Clearly the Chinese are more cautious and reserved than their Australian counterparts. The result, of course, is consistent with how each sample initially explained the NDE. The Chinese sample predominantly believed that they were responding to an ordinary medical or psychological event and therefore reacted accordingly. The Australian sample believed that they were responding to something extraordinary and positively intriguing and so their attitudes reflected this enthusiasm and support.

Why do the studies show such marked difference from each other? Cultural differences undoubtedly play a role but they may not necessarily play the major role. Several other explanations need to be considered before expounding the idea of East-West cultural differences.

First, when Kellehear and Heaven (1989) observed that Australian attitudes to NDEs were rather positive, this was a surprising result. Countless anecdotes by professionals and NDErs in the literature bear witness to the widespread existence of negative attitudes. But an important background factor in explaining the positive attitudes of the Australian study was the high level of familiarity with NDEs. Most of the respondents in that study (72%-79%) were familiar with NDEs from media and press sources. This is not unusual given the attention the NDE has enjoyed from publishers, radio, television, newspapers, and even movie and video makers. In this social context, it would be difficult to imagine currently surveying a community that is not ex-
posed to some part of this media and press attention. However, China is a country where the media and press coverage appears comparatively low. Only between 24% and 31% of the Chinese sample were familiar with NDEs from these media/press sources.

It may be, therefore, that if a survey were conducted in any Western nation 20 or 30 years ago, the findings might not be so dissimilar from the Chinese ones presented here. Without the regular public interviews with NDErs, without the debate between conflicting "experts" on NDEs that has been so widely publicized, many people might readily choose materialistic explanations. Debates about explanations, and media interviews with NDErs recounting their experiences, provide opportunities for reflection that can quickly erode or qualify many people's tendencies to adopt standard medical or psychological explanations. Indeed, this may be reflected in the choice of nearly 18% of Australians to indicate that they "did not know how to explain it" (Kellehear & Heaven, 1989). If the level of information and debate about NDEs is an important variable in explaining community attitudes toward them, then the findings of the Chinese survey may be a reflection of social circumstances (i.e., insufficient information) rather than cultural differences between countries.

Second, there may be a methodological reason for the preference for a medical/psychological explanation and cautious social attitude in the Chinese study. The data were collected by students from the People's University of China in Beijing, the premier Communist Party educational institution in China. The university is not simply endorsed by the Party but was also built, staffed, and attended overwhelmingly by party members, and is widely recognized in China to be favored by the Chinese Communist Party. A further complication is that many rural people in China identify visitors from the city with government agencies. There is a possibility therefore that respondents, on being quizzed by people from the city, and from this particular institution, wished to appear ideologically sound. In this situation they might choose explanations of NDEs that complemented the Marxist materialistic view of the world. If that is the case, our survey would, in part at least, be measuring ideological rather than simply personal responses to NDEs.

On the other hand, the point is complicated by the difficulty of separating public ideologies from personal ones. If the Chinese respondents choose materialistic explanations, do they do so for mere interpersonal reasons or do these views reflect genuinely held personal assumptions? Also, to what extent do materialistic views exist in contradictory but personally acceptable ways with traditional religious views? A qualitative study employing interviews, or a replica-
tion of the survey that does not use people from the city and particularly this educational institution, would be important ways of exploring this problem further.

Finally, the cautious attitudes and preference for medical/psychological explanations may indeed reflect certain cultural values of the Chinese people, and these may serve to complicate the methodological artifact mentioned above. Hisashi Hirayama and Muammer Cetingok (1988) emphasized the importance of the values of interdependence and vertical relations among Asians including the Chinese.

The traditional respect given to those in authority springs from deeper sources than simply the powerless appeasing those with knowledge and power. Among other cultural influences, the Confucian system of thought in China is a secular philosophy permeating all social relations in that country (Shen Ryan, 1985). It emphasizes the interdependence of individuals in a community of interests. This community is then dependent on a community of benevolent authorities who are older, wiser, more informed, or all of these characteristics. This way of relating may bias Chinese respondents in favor of explanations that they believe might be favored by those in authority, in this case the government. Chinese government and academic psychology has favored biological explanations because these explanations are consistent with Marxist theories of historical and dialectical materialism (Brown, 1983; Goodman, 1986). In this context, community explanations for NDEs may reflect both the dominance of these perspectives and/or the known government preference for them. It is not simply the content of the explanations that is cultural in this case, but also the means by which explanations are sought.

Of additional interest are the observations that place of residence and age are correlated with attitudes to someone recounting an NDE. More specifically, rural people and younger persons are more likely to take a positive attitude.

Rural Chinese tolerance for NDEs may derive from the common social experience of peasants with traditional religious ideas and practices. Peasants may have a personal empathy for ancestor worship or stories about the "Pure Land" irrespective of whether these are actual held beliefs of the respondent. They may be more tolerant because they are more accustomed to interacting regularly with those who hold traditional religious beliefs about rebirth and the afterlife. Conversely, urban Chinese may be less receptive to NDErs because they may associate such accounts with the superstitious beliefs of peasant culture. To the "modern" urban dweller in China these may appear "backward," that is, a belief that is inconsistent with modern ideas. Tolerance for NDErs in this cultural context might therefore be lower.
An alternative explanation for the correlation between rural residence and attitudes to an NDEr may be related to the pattern of sampling. The sample was biased towards rural residents and this may load the correlation in this direction. Future research could verify this finding by sampling equal numbers of city and rural people.

The observation that younger persons will take a more positive attitude to NDErs was also found in the Australian study (Kellehear & Heaven, 1989). In that study, the explanation for this tolerance was tied to the pattern of conservative beliefs in different age groups. Older people tend to be more conservative (Wilson, 1973) and this also appears to be the case in China. The crushing of the pro-democracy student movement by the aging rulers of China in June 1989 is a dramatic and tragic example of the clash between youth and age and the experiences and ideologies associated with these.

References


The Near-Death Experience and the Taoism of Chuang Tzu

E. J. Hermann
University of Connecticut

ABSTRACT: This paper compares excerpts from Chuang Tzu's writings and the descriptions of near-death experiencers (NDErs). Similarities between the beliefs of NDErs and those of Taoist patriarch Chuang Tzu suggest that NDErs have experienced a kind of awakening that leads them to reject conventional attitudes toward life and death.

Chuang Tzu (369 B.C.?–286 B.C.), or Master Chuang, was a significant interpreter of Taoism best known for his work Chuang Tzu. The only certain facts known about him are from the Shih chi or Records of the Historian by Ssu-ma Ch’ien (145 B.C.?–89 B.C.), which stated that Chuang Tzu's personal name was Chou, that he lived in a place called Meng, and that he wrote a fictional work of 100,000 words or more. Ssu-ma Ch’ien also wrote that Chuang-Tzu’s teachings were drawn primarily from the sayings of Lao Tzu, but that his perspective was much broader.

The present version of the work entitled Chuang Tzu (Watson, 1964) consists of 33 sections, which are divided into three groups, called the inner chapters, the outer chapters, and miscellaneous chapters. It is generally agreed that the inner chapters are the best representations of the entire Chuang Tzu.

The essence of Taoism is freedom. Taoists believe that in order to gain freedom, the individual must not resist the way of nature. To
Chuang Tzu, man is small and insignificant, and knows virtually nothing about anything. Chuang Tzu casts a critical eye on those who believe they in fact know some truth, or some right way. He believes that it is conventions and labels of right and wrong that cause us to suffer, and that when we give up this constant labeling of right and wrong, good and bad, then we can be free from suffering, since we no longer regard our present situation as any better or worse than any other situation. This giving up of one’s own self-centered way is called wu-wei, in which Taoists proclaim that we become the Way itself, and our actions are as spontaneous and free-flowing as the natural world.

This paper compares the attitudes and beliefs of near-death experiencers (NDErs) to the Taoist philosophy of Chuang Tzu. The purpose is to demonstrate that NDErs tend to approach life and death in a way that is compatible with the teachings of Chuang Tzu.

I undertake this task with considerable caution, because of the difficulty in relating mystical and spiritual experience. Chuang Tzu said “to organize is to destroy,” and he probably would not approve this effort to dissect his work. I have quoted him extensively to show Chuang Tzu’s humor and to avoid distortion.

I chose Chuang Tzu in particular because his teachings seem to be “addressed to the spiritual elite” (Watson, 1964, p. 8), which I believe includes core NDErs. Furthermore, Chuang Tzu continually stressed the futility of words, conventions, and dogma; Burton Watson noted (1964, p. 5): “Chuang Tzu uses throughout his writings that deadliest of weapons against all that is pompous, staid, and holy: humor.” NDErs, when describing their experiences and views of life, also express a concern with spirituality, and not with religious dogma and its endless distinctions.

To begin, I would like to make a comparison between the core experience of NDErs and Chuang Tzu’s descriptions of the Way. Chuang Tzu fully realized the problem of explaining the Way, as Watson explains (1964, p. 7):

Like all mystics, Chuang Tzu insists that language is in the end grievously inadequate to describe the true Way, or the wonderful freedom of the man who has realized his identity with it. Again and again, he cautions that he is giving only a “rough” or “reckless” description of highly poetic and paradoxical language that in fact conveys little more than the essential ineffability of such a state of being.

Compare this to Kenneth Ring’s warning in regard to core NDEs and spiritual awakening (Ring, 1984, p. 51):
First, you must be aware—and some of the respondents I will be quoting make this point explicitly—that there is absolutely no way in which ordinary human language can communicate the essence of these deep NDEs. No verbal or written account can possibly do more than hint at the experience; never can one describe it adequately.

What follows is a comparison between NDE accounts and Chuang Tzu's description of the Way. It is hard to distinguish between the two. The following are two NDErs' accounts of the core experience:

Everything that occurred to me while I was in this state of consciousness was vastly beyond anything I had ever experienced and yet at the same time it was familiar—as if I had always known of its existence. Even now when I try to describe something so beautiful I am mute with awe. There are no words in any language to describe such grandeur. Even the great literary works by men and women fortunate enough to have experienced this blissful state only paint a shadow of its glory. (Ring, 1984, pp. 64-65)

There was a transmission of a higher power, knowledge, understanding, and the "oneness of everything" through gazing upon the light. (Ring, 1984, p. 88)

The above two accounts indicate that in the deepest part of the core NDE, one feels beyond everything, but at the same time one with everything. Chuang Tzu tried to achieve the same effect through this passage, in which he expressed both the ineffability and this "oneness with everything":

Master Tung-kuo asked Chuang Tzu, "This thing called the Way—where does it exist?"
Chuang Tzu said, "There is no place it doesn't exist."
"Come," said Master Tung-kuo, "you must be more specific!"
"It is in the ant."
"As low a thing as that?"
"It is in the panic grass."
"But that's lower still!"
"It is in the tiles and shards."
"How can it be so low?"
"It is in the piss and dung." (Watson, 1964. p. 16)

Here are two more NDE accounts that express the ineffability, as almost all accounts do, and also focus on the timelessness of the core experience:

It's difficult to describe; as a matter of fact, it's impossible to describe. Verbally, it cannot be expressed. It's something which becomes you
and you become it. I could say, "I was peace; I was love." I was the brightness, it was part of me... You just know. You're all-knowing—and everything is a part of you—it's—it's just so beautiful. It was eternity. It's like I was always there and I will always be there, and that my existence on earth was just a brief instant. (Ring, 1984, p. 54)

It was timeless. I was just an infinite being in perfection. And love and safety and security and knowing that nothing could happen to you and you're home forever. That you're safe forever. And that everybody else was. (Ring, 1984. p. 62)

Compare this with Chuang Tzu's description of timelessness as he attempted to convey something about the Way:

It is its own source, its own root. Before Heaven and earth existed it was there, firm from ancient times. It gave spirituality to the spirits of God; it gave birth to Heaven and to earth. It exists beyond the highest point, and yet you cannot call it lofty; it exists beneath the limit of the six directions, and yet you cannot call it deep. It was born before Heaven and earth, and yet you cannot say it has been there for long; it is earlier than the earliest of time, and yet you cannot call it old. (Watson, 1964, p. 77)

NDErs express the great love and acceptance they experienced during the core experience, the infiniteness and sense of eternity:

I felt light-good-happy-joy-at ease. Forever—eternal love. Time meant nothing. Just being. Love. Pure love. Love. The Light was yellow. It was in, around, and through everything... It is God made visible. In, around, and through everything. One who has not experienced it cannot know its feeling. One who has experienced it can never forget it, yearns for its perfection, and longs for the embodiment of It. (Ring, 1984, pp. 55-56)

Compare this with two quotes from Chuang Tzu:

"I have heard the way!"

"Can the Way be learned?"

"Goodness, how could that be... This is the kind of thing it is: there's nothing it doesn't send off, nothing it doesn't welcome, nothing it doesn't destroy, nothing it doesn't complete. It's name is Peace-in-Strife. After the strife, it attains completion." (Watson, 1964, pp. 78-80)

Pour into it and it is never full, dip from it and it never runs dry, and yet it does not know where the supply comes from. This is called the Shaded Light (or precious light). (Watson, 1964, p. 40)
Notice that there "is nothing it doesn't welcome or destroy," and the reference to light.

Chuang Tzu mentioned a "teacher" who passes judgment without being righteous:

This Teacher of mine, this Teacher of mine—he passes judgment on the ten thousand things but he doesn't think himself righteous; his bounty extends to ten thousand generations but he doesn't think himself benevolent. (Watson, 1964, p. 86)

Compare the above passage to two typical accounts of an NDE life review, noting that both NDErs make references to a learning, forgiving quality much like Chuang Tzu's benevolent Teacher's:

His attitude when we came to these scenes (selfish ones) was just that I had been learning, even then. (Moody, 1975, p. 98)

Instantly my entire life was laid bare and open to this wonderful presence, "GOD." I felt inside my being his forgiveness for the things in my life I was ashamed of, as though they were not of great importance. (Ring, 1984, p. 67)

Next I would like to address the problems NDErs face when they attempt to relate their experiences for the first time. Like NDErs, Chuang Tzu realized the problems in describing spiritual and mystical experiences. The spiritual realm that Chuang Tzu and NDErs see is not immediately accessible to most people, who therefore cannot understand it. Chuang Tzu illustrated this point with a dialogue between a great river and Jo of the North Sea:

Jo of the North Sea said, "You can't discuss the ocean with a well frog—he's limited by the space he lives in. You can't discuss ice with a summer insect—he's bound to a single season. You can't discuss the Way with a cramped scholar—he's shackled by his doctrines. Now you have come out beyond your banks and borders and have seen the great sea—so you realize your own pettiness. From now on it will be possible to talk to you about the Great Principle." (Watson, 1964, p. 97)

Here is what some NDErs told Raymond Moody about trying to relate their experiences:

It was very interesting. It's just that I don't like telling people about it. People just kind of look at you like you're crazy. (Moody, 1975, p. 85)

You learn very quickly that people don't take to this as easily as you would like for them to. You simply don't jump up on a little soapbox and go around telling everyone these things. (Moody, 1975, p. 87)
Moody explained that many NDErs don't even bother to try to tell others because the experience is "beyond human language and human modes of perception and existence," much as discussing "ice with a summer insect" would be, as Chuang Tzu wrote. Here is one more account from Chuang Tzu on the same topic; it involves the reaction of a fictional little quail to the superior flight of the great Peng bird, who soars to ninety thousand li:

The little quail laughs at him, saying, "Where does he think he's going? I give a great leap and fly up, but I never get more than ten or twelve yards before I come down fluttering among the weeds and brambles. And that's the best kind of flying anyway! Where does he think he's going?" Such is the difference between big and little. (Watson, 1964, p. 25)

Compare this reaction to one that an NDEr received from two priests and a nurse:

Father X and Father Y, and they kind of shushed me, just like, you know, don't talk about it, just don't talk about it. And when I mentioned it to one of the nurses at the hospital, her reaction was very negative. She said . . . "Don't even talk about it, we don't want to hear about it." So everyone I talked to at the hospital seemed almost afraid to discuss it. (Ring, 1984, p. 95)

The similarity of reactions is clear: those who haven't seen this new state can't comprehend it. Furthermore, those who are oblivious to this "other side" try to bring those that have experienced it back down to the same level.

I would like now to move on to a comparison between NDErs and Chuang Tzu on the topic of life after death. Moody wrote that NDErs are no longer afraid of death, but liken it to a transformation from one state to another. Furthermore this new state is very pleasurable and desirable. Fear of death becomes mere ignorance to those who experience the dropping away of the physical body.

Persons who have "died" choose analogies which portray death as a transition from one state to another, or as an entry into a higher state of consciousness or of being. One woman whose deceased relatives were there to greet her at her death compared death to a "homecoming." Others have likened it to other psychologically positive states, for example, to awakening, to graduating, and to escape from jail. (Moody, 1975, pp. 96-97)
As before, the similarity between NDErs and Chuang Tzu's view of life and death is obvious in the following passage. Note the similarity of NDErs' "homecomings" to Chuang Tzu's concept that hating death is like forgetting the way back home:

How do I know that living life is not a delusion? How do I know that in hating death I am not like a man who, having left home in his youth, has forgotten the way back?

Lady Li was the daughter of the border guard of Ai. When she was first taken captive and brought to the state of Chin, she wept until her tears drenched the collar of her robe. But later, when she went to live in the palace of the ruler, shared his couch with him, and ate the delicious meats of his table, she wondered why she had ever wept. How do I know that the dead do not wonder why they ever longed for life? (Watson, 1964, p. 46)

Some NDErs make the analogy that life is an imprisonment and that death is a release:

Life is like imprisonment. In this state, we just can't understand what prisons these bodies are. Death is such a release–like an escape from prison. That's the best thing I can think of to compare it to. (Moody, 1975, p. 97)

Chuang Tzu wrote that life and death are "the same story"; when we realize this fact, we can be released from our "handcuffs and fetters":

Lao Tzu said, "Why don't you just make him see that life and death are the same story, that acceptable and unacceptable are on a single string? Wouldn't it be well to free him from his handcuffs and fetters?" (Watson, 1964, p. 68)

Compare the following two excerpts, the first from an NDEr, the second from Chuang Tzu. Here the two explain that we should "go along" with life and accept things the way they are, which is the essence of Taoism, and not resist or be afraid of death.

Now, I am not afraid to die. It's not that I have a death wish, or want to die right now. I don't want to be living over there on the other side now, because I'm supposed to be living here. The reason why I'm not afraid to die, though, is that I know where I'm going when I leave here, because I've been there before. (Moody, 1975, pp. 95-96)

The Great Clod burdens me with form, labors me with life, eases me in old age and rests me in death. So if I think well of my life, for the same
reason I must think well of my death. When a skilled smith is casting metal, if the metal should leap up and say, "I insist upon being made into a Mo-yeh [famous sword] he would surely regard it as very inauspicious metal indeed. Now, having had the audacity to take on human form once, if I should say, "I don't want to be anything but a man! Nothing but a man!" the Creator would surely regard me as a most inauspicious sort of person. So now I think of heaven and earth as a great furnace, and the creator as a skilled smith. Where could he send me that would not be all right? I will go off to sleep peacefully, and then with a start I will wake up. (Watson, 1964, pp. 80-82)

The next comparisons I would like to make use the reactions of an NDEr towards death in her family.

The nurse was devastated. She knew Tari was dead and I didn't. "Oh, God!" she wailed. "Your doctor should have been here by now! I'm not supposed to tell you, but I can't let you go on believing Tari is alive. She died early this morning."
"Are you OK?" she asked.
"Yes," I told her much too calmly under the circumstances. In the weeks following, I felt no grief of my own loss, but I felt sorry for my friends and relatives who didn't know where Tari was, and couldn't believe—really believe—that my "experience" was anything more than a vivid dream.
I still don't know who he was, nor do I care! I know he exists at least. Well, I soon realized that my acceptance back into this world depended upon "pretending" to forget, and "pretending" to grieve the loss of my baby. So I did this for everybody else's sake. (Ring, 1984, pp. 80-81)

This NDEr took the death of her child calmly, and felt no grief for her own loss, but pretended to grieve the loss of her baby "for everybody else's sake." In the passage below, Yen Hui has just lost his mother, but like the NDEr he wails not for his own loss but because others expect him to:

Yen Hui said to Confucius, "When Meng-sun Ts'ai's mother died, he wailed without shedding any tears, he did not grieve in his heart, and he conducted the funeral without any look of sorrow. He fell down on these three counts, and yet he is known all over the state of Lu for the excellent way he managed the funeral. Is it really possible to gain such a reputation when there are no facts to support it? I find it very peculiar indeed!"

Confucius said, "Meng-sun did all there was to do. He was advanced beyond ordinary understanding and he would have simplified things even more, but that wasn't practical. However, there is still a lot that he simplified. Meng-sun doesn't know why he lives and doesn't know
why he dies. He doesn't know why he should go ahead; he doesn't know why he should fall behind. In the process of change, he has become a thing [among other things], and he is merely waiting for some other change that he doesn't yet know about. Moreover, when he is changing, how does he know that he is really changing? And when he is not changing, how does he know that he hasn't already changed? You and I, now—we are dreaming and haven't waked up yet. But in his case, though something may startle his body, it won't injure his mind; his emotions will suffer no death. Meng-sun alone has waked up. Men wail and so he wails, too—that's the reason he acts like this. (Watson, 1964, pp. 84-85)

When the husband and son of the NDEr quoted above died also, she was convinced that they too survived death:

My beloved husband died in my arms at home 16 years later. My first-born son lived to be 25 and was killed in a car accident (instantly—no time for pain or suffering) seven years after the death of my husband. My grief was softened and shortened each time. People said, "She's in shock now, she'll grieve more later." Later they said, "She must be a very strong person to live through what she's had to live through so calmly." Neither statement was true. It feels good to tell the truth to someone. They aren't dead. They are all alive, busy and waiting for me. Our separation is only temporary and very short, compared to all of eternity. (Ring, 1984, p. 82)

Chuang Tzu took things a bit further and started to sing and pound on a tub after his wife died. Hui Tzu, a student of Chuang Tzu, questioned him on this behavior:

Chuang Tzu's wife died. When Hui Tzu went to convey his condolences, he found Chuang Tzu sitting with his legs sprawled out, pounding on a tub and singing. "You lived with her, she brought up your children and grew old," said Hui Tzu. "It should be enough simply not to weep at her death. But pounding on a tub and singing—this is going too far, isn't it?"

Chuang Tzu said, "You're wrong. When she first died, do you think I didn't grieve like anyone else? But I looked back to her beginning and the time before she was born. Not only the time before she was born, but the time before she had a body. Not only the time before she had a body, but the time before she had a spirit. In the midst of the jumble of wonder and mystery a change took place and she had a spirit. Another change and she had a body. Another change and she was born. Now there's been another change and she's dead. It's just like the progression of the four seasons, spring, summer, fall, winter.

"Now she's going to lie down peacefully in a vast room. If I were to follow after her bawling and sobbing, it would show that I don't understand anything about fate. So I stopped." (Watson, 1964, p. 113)
My last comparison on the subject of death concerns an NDEr who was sent back to earth against his wishes:

The next thing is that in thirty years, I experienced the worst feeling I ever had. The most depressed, the most severe anxiety I've ever had was at the moment I realized I must return to this earth. That is the greatest depths of depression I personally have ever had since that time or before. It was so devastating that I cannot think of anything bad that has ever happened to me and put it in the same parameters—the distance is a million miles. I did not want to come back. And now that I'm back, I'm absolutely assured of the fact that I did not want to come back. . . . This [earth] is a wonderful place to live if you don't know anywhere else. I know somewhere else. (Ring, 1984. p. 91)

This NDEr has realized "somewhere else" beyond the realm of earth. The following passage from Chuang Tzu describes a skull that lives "somewhere else." Notice how similar the reactions of the skull and the NDEr are when they consider returning to earth from death:

When Chuang Tzu went to Ch'u, he saw an old skull, all dry and parched. He poked it with his carriage whip and then asked, "Sir, were you greedy for life and forgetful of reason, and so came to this? Was your state overthrown and did you bow beneath the ax and so came to this? Did you do some evil deed and were you ashamed to bring disgrace upon your parents and family, and so came to this? Was it through the pangs of cold and hunger that you came to this? Or did your springs and autumns pile up until they brought you to this?"

When he had finished speaking, he dragged the skull over and, using it for a pillow, lay down to sleep.

In the middle of the night, the skull came to him in a dream and said, "You chatter like a rhetorician and all your words betray the entanglements of a living man. The dead know nothing of these! Would you like to hear a lecture on the dead?"

"Indeed," said Chuang Tzu.

The skull said, "Among the dead there are no rulers above, no subjects below, and no chores of the four seasons. With nothing to do, our springs and autumns are as endless as heaven and earth. A king facing south on his throne could have no more happiness than this!"

Chuang Tzu couldn't believe this and said, "If I got the Arbiter of Fate to give you a body again, make you some bones and flesh, return you to your parents and family and your old home and friends, you would want that, wouldn't you?"

The skull frowned severely, wrinkling up its brow. "Why would I throw away more happiness than that of a king on a throne and take on the troubles of a human being again?" it said. (Watson, 1964, pp. 113-115)
Both the skull and the NDEr were more happy dead than they ever were on earth, and for that reason did not want to come back. The NDEr’s description and the writing of Chuang Tzu agree on the futility and foolishness of hating death.

For the next comparisons I would like to shift the emphasis to life rather than death. Chuang Tzu had much to say on how one should live according to the Tao, or Way. The following passage is a good overview of Chuang Tzu’s philosophy:

Is there such a thing as supreme happiness in the world or isn’t there? Is there some way to keep yourself alive or isn’t there? What to do, what to rely on, what to avoid, what to stick by, what to follow, what to leave alone, what to find happiness in, what to hate?

This is what the world honors: wealth, eminence, long life, a good name. This is what the world finds happiness in: a life of ease, rich food, fine clothes, beautiful sights, sweet sounds. This is what it looks down on: poverty, meanness, early death, a bad name. This is what it finds bitter: a life that knows no rest, a mouth that gets no rich food, no fine clothes for the body, no beautiful sights for the eye, no sweet sounds for the ear.

People who can’t get these things fret a great deal and are afraid—this is a stupid way to treat the body. People who are rich wear themselves out rushing around on business, piling up more wealth than they could ever use—this is a superficial way to treat the body. People who are eminent spend night and day scheming and wondering if they are doing right—this is a shoddy way to treat the body. Man lives his life in company with worry, and if he lives a long while, till he’s dull and doddering, then he has spent that much time worrying instead of dying, a bitter lot indeed! This is a callous way to treat the body. (Watson, 1964. p. 111)

The above passage makes clear that Chuang Tzu did not value material possession of any kind. Many NDErs also reflect this value change after their experiences:

Material things . . . have completely faded into the background; material things aren’t important. (Ring, 1984, p. 133)

Oh, I liked materialism and went after it, but my values before were a lovely home and the community where I felt status. . . . Now my values are my smile! (Ring, 1984. p. 133)

The next comparison emphasizes nonattachment. Chuang Tzu described the True Man, or Perfect Man:

The True man of ancient times knew nothing of loving life, knew nothing of hating death. He emerged without delight; he went back in
without a fuss. He came briskly, he went briskly, and that was all. He
didn’t forget where he began; he didn’t try to find out where he would
end. He received something and took pleasure in it; he forgot about it
and handed it back again. This is what I call not using the mind to
repel the Way, not using man to help out Heaven. This is what I call
the True Man. (Watson, 1964, p. 74)

Notice that Chuang Tzu’s True Man receives something, takes plea-
sure in it, and most importantly, forgets about it. Kenneth Ring made
a similar observation concerning NDErs:

The correct understanding here is best expressed, I think, by saying
that while NDErs, like the rest of us, enjoy their possessions, they are
not particularly attached to them. They certainly don’t live for them.
They are there and they have their uses but in the hierarchy of NDE
values, they are not of great worth. Matter is not what matters. (Ring,
1984, p. 133)

Chuang Tzu also urged people to give up the illusion of fame and
reputation in order to gain a new freedom:

The whole world could praise Sung Jung-tzu and it wouldn’t make
him exert himself; the whole world could condemn him and it
wouldn’t make him mope. He drew a clear line between the internal
and the external, and recognized the boundaries of true glory and
disgrace. But that was all. As far as the world went, he didn’t fret and
worry, but there was still ground he left unturned. (Watson, 1964, pp.
25–26)

Some NDErs express a similar freedom in which they no longer are
concerned about impressing others:

I think I used to be a very superficial person, always breaking my butt
to please or to be accepted or to be liked. Now I just don’t give a damn
anymore. It’s really a delicious feeling. (Ring, 1984, p. 130)

(Before) I was insecure, always. . . . [Now] if somebody doesn’t like me,
I don’t fret about it. (Ring, 1984, p. 130)

Chuang Tzu also urged us to “stop and smell the roses”:

Once a man receives this fixed bodily form, he holds on to it, waiting
for the end. Sometimes clashing with things, sometimes bending
before them, he runs his course like a galloping steed, and nothing can
stop him. Is he not pathetic? Sweating and laboring to the end of his
days and never seeing his accomplishment, utterly exhausting him-
self and never knowing where to look for rest—can you help pitying
him? I’m not dead yet! he says, but what good is that? His body decays,
his mind follows it—can you deny that this is a great sorrow? Man’s
life has always been a muddle like this. How could I be the only
muddled one, and other men not muddled? (Watson, 1964, p. 33)

NDErs also realize the futility of getting too caught up in worldly
affairs: the following quotations from NDErs stress the beauty of life
and living in the present moment.

This experience has really changed me and my whole attitude toward
life. . . . I appreciate the beauty of this life. (Ring, 1984. p. 123)

I have a fierce desire to live every wonderful moment of as many days
as I can manage to be gifted with. . . . My life is unquestionably even
richer than before for having had the near-death experience. (Ring,
1984, p. 123)

Another thing that [the NDE] did for me was to give me the informa-
tion that all you have to do to have a life of great interest . . . is simply
to stay in the present moment. . . . If you stay there, you will live in
eternity, I believe. (Ring, 1984, p. 124)

Comparing the next passages, we find that both Chuang Tzu and the
NDEr emphasize inaction, and find a power and peace in stillness:

What ordinary people do and what they find happiness in—I don’t know
whether such happiness is in the end really happiness or not. I look at
what ordinary people find happiness in, what they all make a mad
dash for, racing around as though they couldn’t stop—they all say
they’re happy with it. I’m not happy with it and I’m not unhappy with
it. In the end is there really happiness or isn’t there?

I take inaction to be true happiness, but ordinary people think it is a
bitter thing. . . . The highest happiness, keeping alive—only inaction
gets you close to this! (Watson, 1964, p. 112)

I also learned to sit still [afterward]; to find power in silence. . . . I
learned to see the physical world in a new, highly detailed way. I
noticed the changing colors of lichen on tree trunks, the shape and
direction of the bark’s twists. I sat by a pond and watched a reed
blowing in the wind; watched the iridescently red or electrically blue
damsel flies’ flashing, dazzling flight. (Ring, 1984. p. 125)

The next passage from Chuang Tzu suggests an underlying purpose
in life.
How pitiful the men of the world, who think that simply nourishing the body is enough to preserve life! Then why is what the world does worth doing? It may not be worth doing, and yet it cannot be left undone—this is unavoidable. (Watson, 1964, p. 118)

Many NDErs also say their experience gave them a feeling of purpose or calling:

I think we all have had this experience for a reason. Because there is something we must do [said with emphasis]. We were given a special calling. I truly believe it's like a calling. . . . I think God knows what He's doing and we don't, so the gift is accepted without any question. But there is a purpose for us and if you want to know why, I think it's because God has called you to do something and you have to grow as a person. (Ring, 1984, p. 136)

The following passage concerns the surrender to a higher power, much like a calling or purpose, or as Chuang Tzu wrote, letting go in the Way (Wu-Wei).

Life, death, preservation, loss, failure, success, poverty, riches, worthiness, unworthiness, slander, fame, hunger, thirst, cold, heat—these are the alternations of the world, the workings of fate. Day and night they change place before us and wisdom cannot spy out their source. Therefore, they should not be enough to destroy your harmony; they should not be allowed to enter the storehouse of spirit. If you can harmonize and delight in them, master them and never be at a loss for joy, if you can do this day and night without break and make it be spring with everything, mingling with all and creating the moment within your own mind—this is what I call being whole in power. (Watson, 1964, p. 70)

The following NDEr speaks of becoming free of material possessions; note the similarity to the Taoist concept of Wu-Wei:

Before I was living for material things... Before I was conscious of only me, what I had, what I wanted... I have gradually sloughed off the desires to have and to hold earthly possessions, material possessions to any great degree. I don't worry about tomorrow... because I know that the Lord will take care of me. (Ring, 1984, p. 144)

My final comparisons continue the same theme, rising above a concern with material things. Chuang Tzu tried to make us realize that we are "one with everything."
How much more, then, is possible for a man who governs Heaven and earth, stores up the ten thousand things, lets the six parts of his body be only dwelling, makes ornaments of his ears and eyes, unifies the knowledge of what he knows, and in his mind never tastes death. He will soon choose the day and ascend far off. Men may become his followers, but how could he be willing to bother himself about things? (Watson, 1964, p. 65)

Likewise, the NDEr quoted below has “grown to really know what love is in a universal sense.” This is what Chuang Tzu meant by “storing up the ten thousand things”: giving up on one’s own ego and attaining a level of higher consciousness where the distinctions between things, especially people, are lost:

I went from a person who was selfish, empty, vain, completely vain, frightened of life, of living, of death, of anything and everything to . . . a real sense of freedom in my inmost being, a complete sense of knowledge with God; I’ve grown to really know what love is in a universal sense, and I’m still growing in that area. . . . As I look back on [the NDE], it seems to me that the reason for this happening was for God to come into my life because I wouldn’t let Him come in any other way. . . . I feel now that God is first in my life. . . . In all reality, what this has done also is give me the freedom to be myself, to find myself . . . to be what God wants me to be. (Ring, 1984, p. 144)

Chuang Tzu made many references to attaining the ten thousand things; there are many parallels in this to the attainment of global consciousness.

Once a person reaches such a level of higher consciousness through an NDE or any other process, he or she will necessarily have views and beliefs that are parallel or similar to Chuang Tzu. Attaining this cosmic consciousness, in which there is an awakening from the dream of life for at least a little while, is the core of the NDEr’s experience. The following passage by Chuang Tzu explains his feeling that life is a dream:

He who dreams of drinking wine may weep when morning comes; he who dreams of weeping may in the morning go off to hunt. While he is dreaming he does not know it is a dream, and in his dream he may even try to interpret a dream. Only after he wakes does he know it was a dream. And someday there will be a great awakening when we know that this is all a great dream. Yet the stupid believe they are awake, busily and brightly assuming they understand things, calling this man ruler, that one herdsman—how dense! Confucius and you are both dreaming! And when I say you are dreaming, I am dreaming too. Words like these will be labeled the Supreme Swindle. Yet, after ten
thousand generations, a great sage may appear who will know their meaning, and it will still be as though he appeared with astonishing speed. (Watson, 1964, p. 43)

Chuang Tzu and NDErs are similar in that they have realized that our life is like a dream. The near-death experience is a kind of awakening, in which NDErs realize firsthand that there is no death and that they are one with all others. The value changes in NDErs are a result of this awakening. Since life is only a dream, NDErs become less attached to holding onto it, and higher values of love and knowledge take the place of material possessions. These higher values of love and knowledge are byproducts of the NDErs' new calling and purpose. In a sense, they awaken from their old lives to discover a new higher purpose of what Chuang Tzu called the Way.

References

Letters to the Editor

Near-Death Experiences and *Homo noeticus*

To the Editor:

I want to offer a brief comment on the meaning of near-death experiences (NDEs), because my concept of *Homo noeticus* is sometimes invoked in that regard.

In the Winter 1988 issue of the *Journal*, Nancy Evans Bush's (1988) review of Phyllis Atwater's *Coming Back to Life* (1988) provided an excellent balance to Rosalie Newsome's (1988) case studies of ego, moral, and faith development in NDErs. Bush and Atwater rightly emphasized that living in accord with the spiritual guidance obtained during an NDE is hard work, requiring profound personal change. It takes time, patience, commitment, and, as Newsome noted, courage to integrate the experience. Moreover, the experience itself is not ultimate; just read Da Free John's *Easy Death* (1983) for a helpful and healthful critique of the NDE.

Nearly dying can be a crash course in spirituality (no pun intended), but it's only one course, not grad school. NDEs are enlightening, but not enlightenment. In terms of Patanjali's yogic model of consciousness, an NDE is equivalent to *savikalpa samadhi*, or *samadhi*-with-form, that is, a visionary experience involving the subtle plane in which the experiencer still has a separate sense of self. Beyond that, however, is *nirvikalpa samadhi*, or formless *samadhi*, a causal plane experience of self-as-cosmos in which there is no separation.

But even that experience is not ultimate. Beyond that, according to Da Free John, is the state he calls "open eyes enlightenment" or *sahai samadhi*, "easy" *samadhi*, in which all that arises within one's awareness is seen as simply a modification of the Radiant Transcendental Being, the One-in-all-and-all-in-One. I discussed this in detail in my book (White, 1985), *What Is Enlightenment?*

In terms of the mystery school tradition, an NDE is equivalent to the first initiation, and the disorienting aftereffects that NDErs experience is due in part to their lack of preparation for initiation. There are higher initiations, however, and they go beyond the form of the NDE.
into the formless. Adeptship, the culmination of mystery schooling, is far beyond the first initiation.

It is adepts whom I have in mind as models of *Homo noeticus*: the Jesuses, the Gautamas, and other enlightened men and women of history who delineate the characteristics of what I see as the coming race. Beyond them, it seems to me, are the beings of light met during NDEs; they are enlightened to a still higher degree, that of actually *being* light, and likewise exemplify a still further stage of our future evolution.

*Homo noeticus* is such not simply because he or she has awakened at the heart, a quality wonderfully exemplified by NDErs. *Homo noeticus* also has awakened the wisdom-eye. The love of Christ, the compassion of Buddha, is balanced by wisdom. Without wisdom, transpersonal love can become "sloppy *agape,*" mere emotionalism or foolish, platitudinous behavior that turns people off to what NDErs want to share with them.

NDErs have a distinct calling to live in accordance with the ideals they experience during near-death, and that is fine. But they are returned to life and the Earth to make the ideal *real,* to ground it in the material plane. To *realize* who we are means living from the wisdom-eye as well as the heart.

So it is no wonder that Newsome's three cases don't measure extraordinarily well on the conventional instruments she used. While those instruments may be less than suitable for measuring the Divine, NDErs themselves are less than fully realized divinity. The ultimate yardstick was stated simply two millennia ago: "By their fruits ye shall know them."

By that I do not imply any criticism of Newsome's three subjects, or of NDErs in general. I merely mean that we all have a long way to go, and the spiritual journey proceeds at perhaps a slower pace that we'd like to think after coming back from an NDE. But the timing is God's, not ours, and the amount of frustration, impatience, and anger we feel with others for not understanding our reorientation to life or "getting with the program" is a direct measure of the amount of ego left in us.

References


Prophetic visions and the "Inner Self Helper"

To the Editor:

In the Fall 1988 issue of the Journal, Kenneth Ring (1988) discussed reasons why prophetic visions may not be accurate. I believe I can supply information that shows why prophetic visions may be incorrect; this explanation also relates to Michael Grosso's (1985) concept of Mind-at-Large as described in the book review by Gordon Green (1988) in the same issue. In addition, my explanation also ponders a possible evolutionary path alluded to by Ring and Grosso.

My explanation is primarily a spiritual one, which speculates on the nature of a spirit form that inhabits the physical body and departs at death, or that is joined at death. Some preliminary information is a presentation of the concepts of Max Freedom Long (1948), who studied the "magic" of the kahunas among the native Polynesians in Hawaii. Long believed he discerned how the kahunas were able to perform their magic by understanding the tripartite spiritual nature of man. The Hawaiian names for these three spirits are Unihipili, Uhane, and Aumakua, but he called them simply low self, middle self, and high self.

Long believed the low self spirit had roughly the same size and shape as the physical body and resided in it. The middle self spirit was focused in the head/brain, while the high self spirit had a connecting cord to the physical body but did not penetrate it. The middle self, or normal waking consciousness, does not contact the high self, or super-consciousness, except through the low self, or nonrational subconscious; and even that contact is rare during waking consciousness without training in the manner of the kahunas.

Many of the phenomena encountered in the transcendental realm of a near-death experience (NDE) can be accounted for by speculating that the NDEr makes contact with the high self. According to Long, the high self, when properly requested, could perform miraculous heal-
ings, control weather, and contact other high selves and spirit beings higher than itself. This spirit did not depart the body except at true death, often manifested as light, and cared for the other selves and for the physical body. It was composed of a male/female pair, and thus could demonstrate qualities of either gender. The high self did not think in the human sense, but simply knew.

Finally, the spirit could see into the future, but only the future that was "crystallized." The high self created the future of the individual from the thoughts that reached it. If necessary, the kahunas could rearrange the future of an individual by working with the person's high self. Presumably, the future of a society could be created from the thoughts or actions of many members of that society.

I believe the inaccuracy of NDErs' visions could be explained by this principle. At the time NDErs had their visions, perhaps five to ten years before 1988, a catastrophic scenario was the crystallized future. During the intervening years, various peoples' prayers and positive acts alleviated some of these consequences. Grosso mentioned visions of the Blessed Virgin and messages she has given. The Virgin at Medjugorje has stated that some of her earlier dire predictions did not occur because of peoples' prayers in the interim. Some predictions, however, are so crystallized that they supposedly cannot be averted.

Long also cautioned that the information from the high self is received through the nonrational low self. If the low self has not received information from the high self, it will create an answer, frequently what the requester desires to hear. This low self confusion is unlikely to occur during the NDE itself and is unlikely to produce the same prediction in several individuals, but it could occur in individualized visions that develop as a result of the NDE.

Although 1988 was not as disastrous as some NDErs predicted, at least in terms of earthquakes and war, it was considered an environmentally disastrous year in the form of drought. Perhaps the consequences of peoples' negativity were shifted to a milder form.

Another finding in recent years that seems to relate to a Mind-at-Large and NDE phenomena is that of the "Inner Self Helper" (ISH). This is a phenomenon discovered by therapists who treat patients with multiple personality disorder. Some therapists have found a "personality" that will assist the therapist in treating the patient by prioritizing the problems to be handled at that time, assisting in preventing suicide, producing customized dreams for the patient, and by other contributions to the therapy process.

There can be other helper personalities, but the ISH is distinctly different. Some therapists believe it is essential to the therapy process
to find the ISH. The preferred method for employing the ISH is to have the patient develop the ability to ask the ISH questions, rather than the therapist’s calling upon it in a manner similar to asking for other personalities. Some therapists believe that normal people also have an ISH. I suggest that they are correct, and that the ISH is also the high self and responsible for many of the parapsychological phenomena in NDEs.

The ISH is the only personality that knows of the existence of all the other personalities, including their histories. It is described as nonemotional and, by several therapists, as asexual. The ISH does not usually claim a name, but is assigned one by the patient or therapist. One ISH said that it is the source of love and artistic talent in the individual. One therapist conducted a survey of other therapists who have encountered the ISH in their therapy. Descriptions elicited in this survey included terms such as hyperintellectual and inhuman, one's own spirit or soul, aspects of the spirit of God, and a part of the patient's unconscious that is in touch with even Higher Helpers.

Another therapist believed that a patient's ISH telepathically contacted the therapist's ISH with a message. Other parapsychological and religious phenomena are sometimes associated with the ISH. One therapist stated that the ISH can accelerate healing and change the ages of the alternate personalities. The ISH claims that it can see into the future, although no instances of correct predictions have been published. Most predictions probably deal with the individual patient rather than world visions.

What seems to relate the ISH the NDEs? Christine Comstock (1987) has written extensively about her findings on the ISH. She has found that the first encounter with the ISH is very emotional and brings joy, peace, or a feeling of love. One patient described the voice of her ISH as the most beautiful she had ever heard. I believe the ISH is a functional and healing aspect of the high self, rather than inspirational or providing knowledge as in NDEs.

Finally, an evolutionary aspect can be inferred from these findings by further analysis of Long's description of the spirits of man. Conceivably, NDEs, the ISH, and related phenomena may be the result of the high self spirit's "incarnating" further into the physical body. Perhaps in the more primitive Polynesian society, the high self spirit was only attached to the physical body, but over a period of many generations it penetrates the physical body to a greater extent. This penetration may be gradual as a species, but it can also occur in spurts, such as in an NDE. However, the NDE could also be envisioned as the lower and/or middle self's leaving the body and joining the high self.
References


Dan Punzak
815 Randolph Court
Springfield, IL 62702
Announcement

IANDS International Conference
August 16–19, 1990

The International Association for Near-Death Studies (IANDS) will hold its first International Conference August 16–19, 1990, at the Georgetown University Conference Center in Washington, DC. For further information, write to:

IANDS
P.O. Box 7767
Philadelphia, PA 19101–7767
Participation in the Copyright Clearance Center (CCC) assures you of legal photocopying at the moment of need.

Libraries everywhere have found the easy way to fill photocopy requests legally and instantly, without the need to seek permissions, from more than 3000 key publications in business, science, humanities and social science. You can:

* Fill requests for multiple copies, interlibrary loan (beyond the CONTU guidelines), and reserve desk without fear of copyright infringement.
* Supply copies from CCC-registered publications simply and easily.
* The Copyright Clearance Center is your one-stop place for on-the-spot clearance to photocopy for internal use.
* Its flexible reporting system accepts photocopying reports and returns an itemized invoice. You send only one convenient payment. CCC distributes it to the many publishers whose works you need.

And, you need not keep any records, the CCC computer will do it for you. Register now with the CCC and you will never again have to decline a photocopy request or wonder about compliance with the law for any publication participating in the CCC.

To register or for more information, just contact:
INSTRUCTIONS TO AUTHORS

THE JOURNAL OF NEAR-DEATH STUDIES encourages submission of articles in the following categories: research reports; theoretical or conceptual statements; papers expressing a particular scientific, philosophic, religious, or historical perspective on the study of near-death experiences; cross cultural studies; individual case histories with instructive unusual features; and personal accounts of near-death experiences or related phenomena.

GENERAL REQUIREMENTS: Logical organization is essential. While headings help to structure the content, titles and headings within the manuscript should be as short as possible. Do not use the generic masculine pronoun or other sexist terminology.

MANUSCRIPTS should be submitted in triplicate, typed on one side of the page only, and double spaced throughout. A margin of at least one inch should be left on all four edges. Except under unusual circumstances, manuscripts should not exceed 20, 8 ½ x 11" white pages. Send manuscripts to: Bruce Greyson, M.D., Department of Psychiatry, University of Connecticut Health Center, Farmington, CT 06032.

TITLE PAGE should contain the names of the authors, as well as their academic degrees, affiliations, and phone number of senior author. A name and address for reprint requests should be included. A footnote may contain simple statements of affiliation, credit, and research support. Except for an introductory footnote, footnotes are discouraged.

REFERENCES should be listed on a separate page and referred to in the text by author(s) and year of publication in accordance with the style described in the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association, 3rd Edition, 1983. Only items cited in manuscripts should be listed as references. Page numbers must be provided for direct quotations.

ILLUSTRATIONS should be self-explanatory and used sparingly. Tables and figures must be in camera-ready condition and include captions.