

*Journal*  
*of*  
**Near-Death Studies**

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*Lee W. Bailey, Ph.D.*

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**JOURNAL OF NEAR-DEATH STUDIES** (formerly ANABIOSIS) is sponsored by the International Association for Near-Death Studies (IANDS). The Journal publishes articles on near-death experiences and on the empirical effects and theoretical implications of such events, and on such related phenomena as out-of-body experiences, deathbed visions, the experiences of dying persons, comparable experiences occurring under other circumstances, and the implications of such phenomena for our understanding of human consciousness and its relation to the life and death processes. The Journal is committed to an unbiased exploration of these issues, and specifically welcomes a variety of theoretical perspectives and interpretations that are grounded in empirical observation or research.

The **INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR NEAR-DEATH STUDIES** (IANDS) is a world-wide organization of scientists, scholars, near-death experiencers, and the general public, dedicated to the exploration of near-death experiences (NDEs) and their implications. Incorporated as a nonprofit educational and research organization in 1981, IANDS' objectives are to encourage and support research into NDEs and related phenomena; to disseminate knowledge concerning NDEs and their implications; to further the utilization of near-death research by health care and counseling professionals; to form local chapters of near-death experiencers and interested others; to sponsor symposia and conferences on NDEs and related phenomena; and to maintain a library and archives of near-death-related material. Friends of IANDS chapters are affiliated support groups in many cities for NDErs and their families and for health care and counseling professionals to network locally. Information about membership in IANDS can be obtained by writing to IANDS, P. O. Box 502, East Windsor Hill, CT 06028.

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## Editor's Foreword

This issue of the Journal contains two articles discussing near-death experiences (NDEs) from Buddhist cultures. In the first article, religious scholar Lee Bailey describes contemporary and historical accounts of *delogs*, people in the Himalayan region who seemingly die but then revive and relate detailed accounts of otherworldly journeys. Bailey sees the stories of *delogs* as a bridge between ancient shamanic otherworld journeys and modern NDEs, and argues that despite cross-cultural differences, NDEs appear to reflect a universal spiritual reality. In the second article, Buddhist theologian Todd Murphy describes 10 accounts of NDEs from the popular literature in the exceptionally uniform Buddhist culture of Thailand. Murphy argues that Thai NDEs are consistent in their features, but differ from those reported in Western cultures. He suggests that NDE phenomenology is strongly influenced by cultural and religious expectations, but that the NDE itself seems to serve common functions across cultures.

This issue also contains a review of Peter Novak's *The Division of Consciousness* by pastor Bill Lanning, a wide-ranging brief for a revival of the ancient concept of the soul dividing at death into two parts with distinct properties and fates. We conclude this issue with several letters addressing previously published papers. Psychologist Carla Wills-Brandon objects to NDEr Beverly Brodsky's warnings of the dangers of psychomanteum experimentation, arguing that blaming the psychomanteum procedure deflects attention from the underlying causes of psychological distress, and Brodsky responds with cautions about assuring adequate supervision for such techniques. Next, gerontologist Bruce Horacek questions psychologist Allan Botkin's claim that inducing after-death communications through eye-movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR) can bring about complete resolution of grief, and Botkin responds with a clarification of the benefits and limits of that technique.

Finally, several readers responded to the exchange between psychologist Kenneth Ring and cardiologist Michael Sabom on "religious wars" in near-death research. Psychologist Jenny Wade applauds the public airing of this issue, long debated in private; Swedenborgian scholar Leon Rhodes underscores the role of personal opinion in researchers' interpretation of their data, and explains how interpretations that appear

contradictory can all be valid from a Swedenborgian perspective; medical researcher John Tomlinson suggests that these disagreements involve not so much empirical findings in themselves but rather their ultimate meaning, and he questions, in the light of historical trends in scientific paradigms, whether scientific knowledge and theological knowledge can ever be integrated; and NDEr and massage therapist Barbara Whitfield suggests that the NDE may be bigger than all of our interpretations.

This issue of the Journal also welcomes the new millennium with an expanded roster of Consulting Editors on the inside front cover, reflecting greater diversity in background and expertise. We thank those reviewers who are retiring from our editorial board after many years of service to pursue other interests; and we welcome our new editorial consultants.

Bruce Greyson, M.D.

# A "Little Death": The Near-Death Experience and Tibetan *Delogs*

Lee W. Bailey, Ph.D.  
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**ABSTRACT:** A phenomenon remarkably like the near-death experience has been uncovered in Tibetan culture, aside from the so-called *Tibetan Book of the Dead* (Thurman, 1994). Anthropologists have gathered accounts of contemporary and historical cases of remarkable people called *delogs*. Seemingly dead for several hours or days, these people revive spontaneously and tell detailed accounts of otherworldly journeys. Their journey accounts contain elaborate versions of Buddhist otherworldly landscapes and characters, emphasizing the moral and spiritual teachings of Tibetan Buddhism. These *delogs* are a bridge between contemporary near-death experiences and ancient shamanic practices.

**KEY WORDS:** delog; shaman; Tibet; Buddhism; NDE; near-death experience.

Accounts of people called *delogs*, dying and coming back to life, are well-known in Tibetan culture, and have been sporadically mentioned in Western studies. Now Euro-American researchers are translating texts and interviewing living *delogs*. Reviving after appearing to be dead for hours or days, these remarkable people report fantastic journeys into an otherworld filled with dramatic Buddhist figures judging and punishing or rewarding the dead.

The Tibetan word is transliterated 'Das log, and variously spelled in different languages, but pronounced "DAY-log." I have adopted the spelling of the latest English book entitled *Delog*, about Dawa Drolma, translated by her son (Drolma, 1995). Some regional dialects use other colloquial names.

In typical accounts of *delogs*, as young persons they have been gravely ill. High in the Himalayan mountains, lying in a small hut, they seem to be dead to those grieving around them. But instead, they later report,

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they had risen up above their bodies, which then they did not recognize as their own. Theirs is an archaic example of a mystical experience of the after-death state. *Delog* deaths are an extraordinary tradition in Tibetan culture, strikingly akin to the near-death experience (NDE).

Next these persons' dazed souls enter into a raucous hereafter, guided by their personal deity. They are taken to meet the horrifying Lord of Death himself. They are led on a shocking tour of Hell, where they see numerous condemned souls miserably suffering punishments befitting their sins, such as the nun who hears the unending cries of her own baby whom she murdered. The anguished sinners send urgent messages back to the living, begging family to do rituals to aid in their salvation and exhorting others to live an ethical life. The astonished travelers meet deceased parents and travel to paradise. Returning to the throne of the Lord of Death, they observe the dreadful judgment of souls with a bridge, a scale, or a mirror. They themselves are judged and given a message to send back. Their consciousnesses return to their bodies on earth. They deliver the various messages and exhort all to practice their Tibetan Buddhist religion faithfully.

Such accounts of the Tibetan *delogs* are astoundingly akin to what we in the West call near-death experiences. But there are revealing differences with important implications. Sogyal Rinpoche discussed the *delog* phenomenon in *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* (Sogyal, 1993). He reported that "In Tibet this was an accepted occurrence, and elaborate methods were devised for detecting whether *déloks* were fraudulent or not" (Sogyal, 1993, p. 331). Earlier studies include articles by Lawrence Epstein (1982), Kenneth Ring (1993), and Christopher Carr (1993). I will discuss their views below.

There are historical records of *delogs* and contemporary studies of living *delogs*. Usually women, *delogs* have a revered place in Tibetan popular religion, although they may be neglected by some Buddhists. Historically, Buddhism was introduced to Tibetan culture from India in the 7th century C.E. The Indian master Padmasambhava was then invited by the King of Tibet in the 8th century. In order to bring Buddhism to Tibet, Padmasambhava had to contend with the native Bön religion, and some of the resulting traditions spiritualized these earlier tribal shamanic practices. The first Buddhist monastery was founded in 775 C.E. Later the leadership focused on the Dalai Lama, who was seen as the bodhisattva Avlokiteshvara in human form, living in the Potala palace in Lhasa. Although the *delogs* remained on the fringe of rural, archaic, Himalayan tradition, they absorbed much of the new Buddhism.

Following Epstein, the most notable anthropologist to study *delogs* was the French anthropologist Françoise Pommaret (1989), the first

Westerner to do a book-length study, *Les revenants de l'au-dela dans le monde Tibetain: Sources littéraires et tradition vivante* [Those who return from the hereafter in the Tibetan world: Literary sources and living tradition]. She traveled often to the Himalayan highlands just south of Tibet, still accessible despite the 1959 Chinese invasion of Tibet, and part of Tibetan culture. In Nepal and Bhutan she discovered historical records of ten *delogs* from the 11th to the 20th century. She then interviewed a *delog* in a village in Nepal and three in Bhutan.

The other new book about a *delog* is the English account of *Delog Dawa Drolma*, who lived in Tibet around 1900 to 1941 and recorded her dramatic journeys to the hereafter with the aid of a scribe. Her book *Delog: Journey to Realms Beyond Death* was translated into English in 1995. Wandering Himalayan storytellers (*mani pa*) are also known for retelling these incidents (Pommaret, 1989). *Delog* accounts became a Tibetan literary genre by the 16th century, but they are just now reaching a global audience.

### Historical Texts

Pommaret's studies of historical *delog* texts from the 12th to the 20th centuries included a notably detailed story of a *delog* whose biography was based on a 17th-century manuscript (Thimphu, 1980). This manuscript, like many others, was from a private collection studied by Pommaret. Since so many texts were carried from Tibet by exiles when the Chinese invaded, libraries are incomplete, although the Tibetan Library of Works and Archives in Dharamsala, India, now houses at least a dozen accounts of *delogs*. In this case, the text (Thimphu, 1980) was a 193-page book, but has no colophon giving more publication details. The 17th-century original date was deduced by Pommaret (1989) from other references.

#### *Chos 'dzom* ("Chonzom")

Sangs Rgyas chos 'dzom of Bhutan lived soon after 1650. As a 12-year-old girl, she said that the bodhisattva Avlokiteshvara told her that she had seven days to travel in the 18 realms of the hereafter. Feeling blessed, she was taken to his paradise, Mount Potala. Returning home, she heard her immensely sad parents say that she was dead. She saw her own corpse, but cried because it was a pig! She met her *yi dam* (personal divinity) who guided her, saying, "Do not be attached to your body of illusion; lift your spirit towards the essence of things. Follow me." He

took her hand, assuring her with the classic Buddhist mantra "*Om mani padme hum*" ("Hail, the jewel in the lotus") (Pommaret, 1989, p. 32).

Taken to the first realm between incarnations (*bardo*), she witnessed the terrible suffering of the dead. Vast numbers of people were experiencing painful retribution matched to their sins. But she and her *yi dam* entered a place of pure white light. All the mountains, valleys, and bodies of the dead were glowing pure white. A dazzling, white divinity had a shocking white face. Soon she saw more terrifying divinities of yellow, red, and green, and she fainted. Revived, she traversed a bridge over an ocean of fire, where she witnessed an ox-headed acolyte of the Lord of Death beating some tied-up victims for having eaten meat. Further on, she saw several dazzling beams of light, leading to regions of various Buddhas, gods, demi-gods, humans, and animals.

But first she had to meet the horrifying Lord of Death, Yama. Protected by her personal divinity, she entered his palace and trembled as she saw his ugly, red face, wide-eyed and fanged. Wearing a tiger skin, skulls, and flames, he held the fateful mirror of existence, a sword, and water. His frightening voice rumbled like a thousand dragons. He was attended by numerous ugly, animal-headed acolytes and a nasty, little, black demon holding black pebbles signifying the sinful deeds of each poor person to be judged. But a white deity held white pebbles that would weigh against the black deeds. This vast army of beasts was chanting "execute! execute!" or whacking off the heads of the weeping victims.

Our horrified traveler fainted, but was revived and told by her protective guide that all these suffering ones were receiving their retribution for having killed while on earth. But the faithful would not suffer so. She was told by the Lord of Death that, according to the mirror of existence, she had been dead seven days, and that it was now time for her to return to the land of the living. Her task was to be a messenger between the living and the dead. Furthermore, she was told that she was the incarnation of Avalokiteshvara Mahakaruna and she was to explain to humans the *bardos* and the 18 hells in detail without hiding anything. She was to give grave warnings from the Lord of Death about punishments for such moral trespasses as infanticide, adultery, greed, black magic, and war. He urged serious religious practices, such as meditation: "You must inspire all people to practice religion" (Pommaret, 1989, p. 65). He foretold that she would return for her final death at age 50, but she must hurry back, because her family was about to cremate her corpse.

Chos 'dzom immediately returned to her village, Za chu sgang, and saw her corpse. She then lost consciousness and a man said that the

heart of her corpse was now warm. She awoke and soon the entire village was exclaiming: "The girl has returned from the land of the dead" (Pommaret, 1989, p. 66). Some skeptics accused her of not telling the truth, but many gathered around her urging her to tell what she saw in the *bardo*. She told of her journey while dead for seven days, seeing the 18 hells and all the paradises. Finally, she stressed that the message of the Lord of the Dead is more joyous and precious than gold. Her experience demonstrates the typical elements of the *delog* phenomenon.

### *Living Delogs*

In addition to the studying historical texts, Pommaret interviewed several living *delogs*. She interviewed at least four living *delogs* in the 1980s. In Bhutan, in the village of Wamrong, she interviewed a thin, wrinkled elderly woman, Rizing Gyelmo, who was surprised that strangers would be interested in her. In 1982, she was 78 years old. She had been married to a peasant and had four children, all now married with children. Her husband had died in 1972, and she now lived with two sisters. Rizing reported that she "died" first at the age of five months, after a grave illness. She "died" and returned later, but at the age of 13 she had the revelation that she was a *delog*, and an incarnation of the bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara. She emphasized that only in the old days did the *delogs* die for several days. Now she was one of those who die for only a few hours, so she should actually not be called a *delog*, but a *nyin log*, meaning "returning in one day." Pommaret (1989) witnessed her during a three-hour séance when she chanted a very long call to the dead to come forth.

A second *delog*, found in the village of Khamdang, was named Karma Wangzom. As an infant she had been mistreated by a drunken father, she said, and had "died" several times. At the age of 13 she became a *delog*. She stopped eating garlic, onions, pork, fish and eggs. She began to "die" on fasting days, the 10th, 15th, and 30th of each month. She would "die" for three or six hours, beginning at 6:00 in the morning. On her return she sang the messages from the dead and the Lord of the Dead. She said that she had not received particularly religious teachings before becoming a *delog*. Some villagers said that this *delog* had suffered from epilepsy but had succeeded in controlling it. This raises the question of the role of illnesses such as epilepsy in *delog*-like traditions. In his classic study of shamanism, Mircea Eliade (1951) discovered that illnesses such as epilepsy were often characteristic of tribal

spiritual healers. Among the Siberian Voguls, for example, "the future shaman . . . is sometimes even subject to epileptic seizures, which are interpreted as meetings with the gods" (Eliade, 1951, p. 15). Or, "Often when the shaman's or medicine man's vocation is revealed through an illness or an epileptoid attack, the initiation of the candidate is equivalent to a cure" (Eliade, 1951, p. 27). Eliade concluded:

Whether he is chosen by gods or spirits to be their mouthpiece, or is pre-disposed by this function by physical defects, or has a heredity that is equivalent to a magico-religious vocation, the medicine man [or woman] . . . has more direct relations with the sacred. . . . Infirmity, nervous disorder, spontaneous vocation, or heredity are so many external signs of "choice," an "election." (1951, p. 31)

So to Eliade, a *delog* having epilepsy would not be discrediting. It would likely be a mark of being called into the sacred realm of her vocation.

In the Bhutanese village of Maidung an 18-year-old girl lived on a prosperous farm and dressed in a Tibetan robe, indicating a religious vocation. She told Pommaret that she was named Choekyi Wamgmo by the Lord of the Dead. She had "died" often as a child, and at age 14 she proclaimed herself a *delog*. Like others, she was considered to be the reincarnation of an earlier *delog*. According to the local custom of sororal polygyny, she had a daughter by her sister's husband. She did not wish to live a conventional married life, so she made herself a stone retreat hut where she lived with her child, devoting herself to the religious life. Having a daughter, she said, she was unable to visit certain parts of the otherworld. Now she "died" on the 10th, 25th, and 30th of the lunar month. Many people from the region came to her for advice. Some believed that her "deaths" resembled epileptic crises.

Pommaret (1989) learned that various *delogs* have been reported to have a cold heart and a cold body, or a slow heartbeat during their journeys to the land of the dead. They then return with news of the deceased for their families. One man from Tongsa, in central Bhutan, who was blind, was a renowned *delog* who "died" on the 15th and 30th of each month and returned, reporting the news of people's dead parents, the causes of illnesses, and of the future. Pommaret (1989) included photographs of some of these *delogs* in her book.

In the Bhutanese valley of Chumey à Bumthang in 1977–1978 a boy was born to a family of poor peasants. His mother later died and his father remarried. The unhappy boy ran away to the monastery of Petsheing à Bumthang Choekhor, to join an uncle. There he fell ill and "died" in 1985. He was returned to his family where he "died" a second

time and reported that he saw his mother. His father called his vision demonic and beat him, but the villagers declared the boy a *delog*. He was sent to the monastery at Nyimalung, where he studied briefly, but the little 8-year-old failed to persuade the people outside his village of the validity of his experience, so he was sent home to become a cowherd (Pommaret, 1989).

### *Influences Behind the Delog Accounts*

Historically, large portions of Hinduism were adopted by Buddhism, especially in the area of cosmology, so it is no surprise that their pictures of the infernal realms are very similar (Pommaret, 1989). Many Hindu details, such as the names of various hells, and the image of the copper cauldrons for cooking the condemned, can be found the Buddhist *Traité de la Grand Vertu de Sagesse*, from around the 3<sup>rd</sup> century A.D. (Pommaret, 1989). Similarly, the archaic pre-Buddhist Bön tribal traditions may have also absorbed some older Hindu traditions.

The way certain sins are highlighted and their punishments are made to fit the sin reflects the issues of concern in traditional Tibetan society. For example, for practicing black magic, the punishment is to have a magic dagger plunged into the body. The *delogs* teach the Buddhist view that the families of the dead can help save them ritually by offering prayer flags, food, and water, and by decorating statues and reciting sacred texts. The *delog* scene of the judgment by the Lord of the Dead Yama Dharmaraja reflects the background of Hindu Lord of the Dead, Yama, and his acolytes, the black and white pebbles, and the mirror of truth. Retributive punishment may be cumulative, but it is temporary, and rebirth is certain, affirmed by the classic Hindu and Buddhist doctrines of reincarnation and karma.

Other details have a more uniquely Tibetan background, such as the tradition of the god and the demon born at the same time as a person (Pommaret, 1989). Although the traditional accounts of the *delogs* certainly has roots in the archaic Bön tribal religion in Tibet prior to the Buddhist influence, the literature of the *delog* now largely reflects much orthodox Buddhism. Nevertheless, the *delogs* tend to be more part of the rural, popular religion than the highly literate monastic culture. The high goals of the monasteries strive to raise the consciousness of students above the fear of punishment and direct them toward compassion and wisdom, detachment and meditative insight. This is partly why the monasteries do not encourage the *delogs*. They are acknowledged, however, as part of the larger spiritual community.

The *delog* focus on death is part of the considerable preparation for death in all of Buddhism. The so-called *Tibetan Book of the Dead* [*Bardo Thödol*] (Thurman, 1994) is part of a large death literature in which students are taught to meditate on impermanence (Govinda, 1960). Subsequently, one's state of mind at the time of death is considered vitally important, because it can determine what kind of rebirth a person will have. "Strongly negative thoughts at the time of death—anger, resentment, or hatred, etc.—this can erase the effects of a lifetime of virtuous conduct and lead to a rebirth characterized by suffering" (Powers, 1995, p. 305). Conversely, positive thoughts can reverse a lifetime of negativity.

The descent to the underworld is one of the most universal themes of visionary experiences, and in India and China the literature on this theme is considerable. In Tibet, the main forms are (1) the savior-figure, such as the famous disciple of Buddha, Maudgalyayana (Pommaret, 1989) or the divine Alvalokiteshvara, or (2) the human *delog*. A common Chinese theme is the return of an ordinary dead person to life due to the error of an infernal bureaucratic functionary (Pommaret, 1989). A theme parallel to ancient Iranian religion is the bridge over which the dead must cross. In ancient Persian Zoroastrianism it is called the Chinvat bridge, which is wide and easy for believers to cross, but narrow as an upright razor for sinners (Pommaret, 1989).

Tibet may have been influenced by traditions of shamanic otherworld journeys from the Turkish-Mongolian culture. One text reported that "a slave of the Mongols had been plunged for seven days into a hypnotic sleep before being interrogated on his visions" (Pommaret, 1989, p. 99). Sleep was sometimes described by the Turkish Mongols as a "little death," as it is in Tibetan culture.

### **Comparing the *Delog* and the Near-Death Experience**

Pommaret (1989) outlined a typology of the *delog* adventure that can be contrasted with many typical elements of the contemporary Western near-death experience.

#### *Presentation of the Delog*

First, the recitation of the *delog* story always begins with a short prayer. The *delog* is presented by name, parents' names, and birthplace.

For example:

In Bhutan in the western province of Bkra shis sgang, in a place called 'Phangs ri gsang gdun, lived a man Bsod nams don grub and a woman Tshe dgang rgyal mo who had all the signs of the *dakini Ye shes mtsho rgyal*. They had a daughter Sangs rgyas chos 'dzom who was an incarnation of the bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara. (Pommaret, 1989, p. 67)

Comparing this to contemporary near-death studies, we can see that NDEs focus on the individual. Western individuality minimizes such concern for parents, birthplace, and the atmosphere of an ancient tribal society oriented to land and family. So by contrast, NDEs in a Western industrial society are more likely to focus on individuals and their lives than on parents and birthplace. Nor are NDEs likely to have so strong a religious emphasis as to begin with a prayer. And Westerners would not dare say that the near-death survivor was an incarnation of a divine figure.

### *Premonition Dream and Death*

Some *delogs* experience a premonition dream and there may be an allusion to their intense desire to practice the religion of their ancestors. One premonition dream of Byand chub send ge went like this:

A white boy advised me not to eat the food that people were eating. I followed him and he sat in the center of a lotus of a thousand petals. He was surrounded by thousands of others. All recited the mantra *Om mani padma hum* (Hail, the jewel in the lotus). He gave me a liquid like milk, saying that it was nectar. And he gave me a crystal rosary and said: "Daughter . . . I am Avalokiteshvara" and he disappeared like a rainbow. (Pommaret, 1989, p. 68)

Then an illness, often quite sudden, leads to the death of the *delog*.

This dream centers on the symbolism of a Buddhist divine child, seated in the midst of a huge Buddhist lotus. He is the jewel in the lotus of the classic mantra. He is Avalokiteshvara, the bodhisattva of compassion as a child. His appearance in a dream is interpreted as a prelude to a journey to another realm. For Buddhists all reality is ultimately mind, so dreams could possibly foretell later events. But while some Westerners may be interested in dream interpretation, few would take a dream to be a premonition of literal events such as a near-death experience. Influenced more by Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung,

a Western view would more likely see such dreams only symbolically. Jung would see the child as the divine within, the Self.

### *Realization of Death*

At first, the *delogs* may not realize that they are dead, when the spirit separates from the body, leaving it seeming like an animal in the *delog's* clothing. As the disembodied spirit roams about the home, the *delog* may not understand why the rest of the family is acting so strangely and unresponsive to the *delog's* efforts at communication. The experience of Gling Bza' chos skyid is typical:

Then when I saw my own bed, there was the cadaver of a big pig covered with my clothing. My husband and my children and all the neighbors of the village arrived and began to cry. . . . They began to prepare for a religious ceremony and I thought, "What are you doing?" But they did not see me and I felt abandoned. I did not think that I was dead. (Pommaret, 1989, p. 70)

Finally, the *delog* realizes that she or he actually is dead.

Now the experience of the *delog* begins to sound more like a typical near-death experience. The out-of-body experience and the failure to realize one is dead are familiar, as well as feeling perplexed when people do not see or hear one's floating soul. Some also feel no attachment to their dead bodies below, and are surprised to discover that the corpse below is theirs (Gibbs, 1997). Of course, the big difference in the *delog* experience is that of seeing the body below as a pig, which is quite unlike a typical NDE. The pig is a Tibetan Buddhist symbol of ignorance and delusion, pictured in mandalas such as the Wheel of Life (Blofeld, 1970).

### *First Contact with the Other World*

Next the *delogs* have their first contact with the other world, the realm between life and death, or *bardo*, which seems like a countryside. They likely meet frightening acolytes of the Lord of Death. They frequently meet their familiar protective divinity, the *yi dam*, who will be their mentor in the infernal realms. In most accounts, the *delog* crosses a bridge over an enormous river, marking the entry into the other world.

When Chos 'dzom met her protective deity (*yi dam*) and guide, he said, "Don't you know that you are dead? Don't show attachment to your body of illusion; lift your spirit towards the essence of things. Come where I will lead you" (Pommaret, 1989, p. 32). Then she met those terrifying

creatures crying "execute! execute!" but was protected by her *yi dam* and her mantra.

The spiritual guide is sometimes part of the Western NDE, especially in the medieval versions, where angelic protectors guide the perplexed wanderers (Zaleski, 1987). Ring pointed out that "we have in our own Western tradition NDEs that are, *almost point for point*, the exact equivalent of the *das-log* experience in Tibet. I'm referring to the medieval period" (1993, p. 80). Dante's *Divine Comedy* (Alighieri, 1939/14th century) was the culmination of this tradition. In it he was first guided by the literary Virgil, then the more transcendent Beatrice, whose "eyes shone brighter than the stars" (Alighieri, 1939/14th century, "Inferno," II: 55). In the "Inferno," Beatrice said: "Only those things should be feared that have power to do us ill, nothing else, for nothing else is fearful, and I am made such by God of His grace that your misery does not touch me nor a flame of the fires here assail me" (Alighieri, 1939/14th century, "Inferno," II: 89-93).

Buddhists are urged as part of their basic education in life to develop a relationship with their individual guiding deity, so they will recognize it at death. But often contemporary NDErs are on their own, which may be the source of innumerable subsequent difficulties in adjustment. The bridge provides a border between life and death. In Western NDEs, however, is it more likely a point of no return, whereas for *delogs*, it is not.

Most Western religions, in the context of Western materialism, now struggle to transmit a sense of the transcendent. By contrast, Tibetan Buddhism assumes the greater reality of the vast undying transcendent spaciousness surrounding earthly life. In Buddhist belief, this realm of light is reality, and the earthly life, with its brief impermanence and suffering, is ultimately an illusion. This is one of the most important differences between the two religions.

### *Description of the Infernal Realms*

Next the *delog* is taken on a voyage into the infernal realm to observe and understand the tortures of karma. In an initial appearance before the Lord of the Dead, the *delogs* and their guides are invited to tour the land of the unliving and then return before his throne. Often they soon meet a familiar person, such as a parent or brother, whose transgressions and punishments are explained. Urgent requests for living survivors to perform rituals to save the suffering are frequent. For example, Karma dbang 'dzin met her deceased brother, who was forced to

become a cowherder. Having not studied his religion and learned right from wrong behavior, he stooped to some wickedness in life and so he must now suffer. He begged her to perform some rituals to assist in his deliverance, including serving tea at the monastery, copying and reading religious texts, and offering a hundred thousand sacrificial gifts to meditating sages (Pommaret, 1989). Some *delogs* may observe scenes of deliverance; some travel in the higher realms of the gods, paradises, buddhas, and bodhisattvas; while others venture into the lower realms of animals being reincarnated.

While travelers in a Western NDEs may meet known persons, there is little concern for the living doing rituals to aid the dead, outside the Mormon faith. In the West the request for the living to perform rituals to save a dead individual from punishment is largely a historical memory of medieval tradition. Some contemporary NDEs, however, may be greatly concerned with collective moral issues, such as Dannion Brinkley's prophetic visions of ecological and nuclear disasters (Brinkley and Perry, 1994). Individuals struggling with their own moral and spiritual issues, Brinkley saw, simply experience the pain that they caused others until they learn. They do not typically encounter the terrifying scenes of punishment pictured in *delog* experiences.

### *Reappearance Before the Lord of the Dead*

The sixth theme in the journeys of the *delogs* is the reappearance before Yama, the observation of several judgments, and the judgment of the *delogs* themselves. An important factor is that they have accumulated sufficient good karma in their previous lives so that the Lord of Death sends them back to live in their old bodies. Finally Yama confers on the *delog* a long list of warning messages for the living. One of the longest was that delivered to Kun dga' rang grol, including:

Transmit this message to lamas: . . . Let them attempt to be perfect guides for human beings. . . . Transmit this message to government functionaries: do not give without reason illegal punishments, for it is a reason to fall into hell. . . . Transmit this message to nuns: renounce domestic tasks and force yourselves to practice religion. . . . Transmit this message to the *mani pa* of the world: convert the royalty to Buddhism but do not exaggerate your stories. . . . Transmit this message to the laity: respect your parents, offer food. . . . be sincere, do not beat animals; if you look inside yourselves there are demons. . . . Live so that you will have no shame in my presence. (Pommaret, 1989, p. 77)

Why do these concerns with moral judgment and specific admonitions to good behavior seem so foreign to contemporary NDEs? I suggest that it is because they represent two different types of cultural development. First of all, most of the people who seek out the *delogs* are not literate, but are simple peasants in the rural Himalayan regions. Valued education was brought to the mountains by the Buddhist monasteries, and moral lessons are very explicit in that education. In Western mass education, many basic moral lessons are more implicit. But even secular education teaches honesty, truth, fairness, civic responsibility, the value of law, democracy, and other moral teachings originally taught by religions, though, of course, not by all religions.

Secondly, Western culture has absorbed and spread many of the moral lessons of its religions through volunteer institutions such as the Red Cross and through government programs such as welfare. When successful, mass education has been the bridge for much of this development. The mental responsibilities and self-control cultivated in mass education make the forceful, fearful admonitions to personal morality of old religions less necessary. Through mass education, literate understanding increasingly replaces fear of hell as a moral motive. The themes of an NDE inevitably reflect the collective issues of one's culture.

### *Return to Earth*

When the Tibetan *delog* returns to life, and awakens very thirsty after seven days or so, the person in charge of the cadaver is generally terrified. Some people believe the adventures of *delogs*, but others see in them charlatans or even demons. Finally, *delogs* are usually recognized as holy persons, and they spread their experiences throughout the region, exhorting all to abandon any ultimately punishable behavior and practice Buddhism wholeheartedly. Their stories are then written down by a scribe (Pommaret, 1989).

There is no shortage of skepticism in the rural Himalayan region. The response of some that the *delog* is a charlatan or demon sounds rather familiar to Western students of NDEs. In the West, scientific skeptics offer the charlatan or the hallucination argument, while religious fundamentalists offer the demon or the Satan-in-disguise-tricking-you accusation.

Survivors of NDEs in the West may occasionally be seen as holy persons, but many others, including survivors themselves, reject any such suggestions. Today saints such as Mother Teresa are rare in the West.

Fewer people in industrial societies enter on a traditional path of holy vows, because the focus is on overcoming suffering through technology. Consequently an NDEr does not so easily undertake a traditional spiritual practice and join a monastery or convent, as was more common in medieval cultures. This leaves many NDE survivors struggling without the communal support and spiritual patterns to expand upon their experiences. Writing down the story remains an important step everywhere, however, even if the survivor needs the assistance of a scribe, in the West taking the form of a professional writer or editor.

### Fiction or History?

Are the *delog* stories simply a genre of Tibetan literary fiction rooted in exaggerated oral tradition? Or are they authentic historical accounts of survivors of near-death experiences? Based upon her interviews with living *delogs*, Pommaret concluded that the *delogs* are actual historical persons, not just fictions:

... le fait que des *das log* existent aujourd'hui prouvent définitivement qu'à la base des biographies, il y a non pas des fictions littéraires mais des personnes réelles [the fact that the *delogs* exist today proves definitively that at the base of the biographies there are not literary fictions but real persons]. (Pommaret, 1989, p. 82)

The story of the *delog* Dawa Drolma provides further evidence for the historicity of *delogs*. Up to 1941 she underwent several classical journeys into the underworld. Her son, now living in the United States, testified that at times, "For five full days she lay cold, breathless, and devoid of any vital signs, while her consciousness moved freely into other realms" (Drolma, 1995, p. vii). Her experiences gave her great spiritual authority. A great lama, Tromge Trungpa, witnessed her corpse coming back to life. Once, upon waking up, she accurately knew the location of some buried coins, which she could not possibly have known unless told by deceased persons in the other world (Drolma, 1995, p. ix). These reports correspond with contemporary cases of NDE survivors showing no signs of life (Bailey and Yates, 1996) and awakening knowing new information, such as the famous sneaker perched on the unlikely hospital ledge (Sharp, 1995). The range of time that a *delog* is unconscious varies greatly, from a few hours to several days. The range of consciousness also varies, from a mild trance to apparent death, with no breathing and no vital signs.

### Interpretation

How can we interpret these phenomena? First we must ask what the native Bhutanese mean when they say someone "dies." Pommaret (1989) explained that the Tibetan verb used, *shi ba*, has two senses: one meaning is a clinical death as defined by Western medicine; the second meaning is the departing of the principle of consciousness from the bodily envelope. If the consciousness has left the body because of a demon or a sudden fright, for example, a ritual can be undertaken to "recall the soul." The Tibetan cultural border between death and the loss of consciousness is not tidy. The same linguistic usage has been reported among the Turkish-Mongolian people. In Bhutan a person may be called "dead" if he or she faints for a few minutes or loses consciousness at the end of a séance (Pommaret, 1989). Sicknesses such as epilepsy may also take one to the fuzzy border of death.

Nevertheless, these *delogs* may also lie unconscious for days with no food or drink, and return with remarkably detailed accounts of classic religious landscapes. The *delogs* may live in the peripheral areas of Bhutan, far from the main monasteries, and they deny having received any religious teachings, yet they recite detailed Buddhist chants. They all serve the bodhisattva Avlokiteshvara. After an initial traumatic illness, they "die" on traditional Buddhist days of fasting each month.

Secondly, Pommaret was one of the anthropologists who asked whether the *delogs* were enacting practices from very ancient tribal religious traditions, blending, almost obscuring them with Buddhist themes:

les *'das log* sont-ils témoins inconscients d'un phénomène chamanique qui aurait été recuperé par le bhouddhisme au point d'oblitérer totalement son origine? [Are the *delogs* unconscious witnesses of a shamanic phenomenon which has been blended with Buddhism to the point of totally obliterating its origin?] (Pommaret, 1989, p. 153)

The widespread religious traditions now called "shamanism," going back to the dawn of culture, traditionally involve entering a trance, sometimes flirting with death, journeying to another realm, and returning with helpful information. Shamanism is a diverse, worldwide phenomenon, ranging from Australian aborigine to Siberian practices. Eliade's classic text documented widespread practices, including initiatory illnesses and suffering near death: "Sick with smallpox, the future

[Siberian] shaman remained unconscious for three days and so nearly dead that on the third day he was almost buried" (Eliade, 1951, p. 39).

Death, descent to the underworld, and resurrection are central themes in shamanic traditions. The anthropologist Irving Hallowell (1940) studied the Algonkian Saulteaux in Canada and found numerous accounts of otherworld journeys and resuscitations of people supposed to be dead, usually of extraordinary spiritual powers. One native told him: "I saw a man who died and lay dead for two days" (Hallowell, 1940, p. 30). He told of a journey where he met his deceased parents. Returning, he reported:

But even daylight here is not so bright as it is in the country I had visited. I had been lying for two days. But I had traveled a long distance in that length of time. It is not right to cry too much for our friends, because they are in a good place. They are well off there. So I'm going to tell everybody not to be scared about dying. (Hallowell, 1940, pp. 30-31)

Pommaret proposed that the Tibetan *delogs* are living evidence of the practice of archaic Himalayan shamanism, blended with Buddhism: "les *das log* possèdent les critères essentiels d'un phénomène chamanique [the *delogs* possess the essential criteria of a shamanic phenomenon]" (1989, p. 161). William Serdahely agreed, reviewing a number of reports of shamans whose apparent deaths initiated them into their spiritual and healing powers: "it would seem that some shamans were near-death experiencers first" (Serdahely, 1991, p. 256).

Bringing these data to the quest to understand near-death experiences, we can see that contemporary NDEs have the marks of ancient shamanic traditions and are akin to them. Even though most Western survivors of NDEs may have no idea of the shamanic background to their experiences, the Tibetan *delogs* are a living bridge to this tribal past. This connection sheds new light on some problems of the interpretation of NDEs.

The debate over the definition of death and whether NDE survivors were actually dead can now point to the fuzzy border, the liminal range between life and death in shamanic tradition. Apparently shamans may enter into a light trance, a long, heavy trance, a long state of comatose unconsciousness, or a dramatic loss of life signs for some time, and still return to life. Heeding this phenomenon, the study of NDEs need not get blocked at the issue whether all the survivors were completely dead or experienced a "little death." We can study the state of consciousness itself, whether a trance, coma, or clinical death; and we can study the results, as a process, a fuzzy but meaningful alternative to conventional

thinking that seeks dualistic precision on such matters. Death is a mysterious process, with many variations in consciousness, including ego death and bodily resuscitation.

Contemporary scholars of shamanic practices have acknowledged these connections between shamanism and NDEs. Anthropologist Michael Harner, the author of a classic study of shamanism (1980) who underwent shamanic initiations himself, agreed that "there is an overlap between shamanism and near-death experiences" (M. Harner, personal communication, June, 1997). Joan Halifax placed this theme in the larger context:

The shaman's initiation . . . embraces the experience of death, resurrection and realization or illumination. . . . Variations on the fundamental themes of death and rebirth are found in all mythological traditions, and an encounter with death and release into rebirth are immutable dimensions of most personal religious experiences. (1979, p. 4)

The study of these experiences gives us a greater understanding not only of psychology, psychopathology and parapsychology, but also of near-death and mystical experiences. (1987, p. 217)

Clearly there is a strong overlap between NDEs and the *delog* experiences: out-of-body experiences, meeting others, the life review, the border or bridge to the other world, coming back, telling others, effects on lives, and new views of death. Survivors and students of NDEs can place their journeys into other worlds in the contexts of shamanic journeys, including the Tibetan *delogs*. Indeed, as Timothy Green suggested, "By developing the skill of shamanic journeying, NDErs could become shamanic healers" (1998, p. 209).

Three important themes—cultural, social scientific, and spiritual—underlie these discussions, complex issues that need further reflection. The cultural theme is the issue of cultural relativity. The *delog* literature, as well as the shamanic parallels, both raise the serious question of how much cultural variation points to total cultural relativism and how much the variation reflects only surface differences symbolizing deeper universals in all NDEs. Obviously shamanic and other soul journeys are shaped by their local cultural symbols, much as the *delogs* have absorbed Buddhist and Hindu cosmologies. The NDEs of Western industrialized cultures will likewise be influenced by their local cultural forms, including, for example, industrialism, Christianity, and psychoanalysis. The *delog* material gives evidence to the cultural relativists who would argue that the contemporary Euro-American picture of NDEs is neither a standard nor a universal pattern, nor is it the

criterion or touchstone to which we should compare similar phenomena from other cultures. On the contrary, we should be acutely aware that our current eruption of NDEs is very strongly shaped by our culture, just as the others have been. Most radically, a relativist might argue that there is no single neutral pattern, no core, invariant NDE, whether industrial American or spiritual Tibetan. And the extreme relativist might conclude that these visions are cultural constructs made up from meaningless hallucinations and superstitious mythologies.

The social scientific theme involves interpretations of a common core beneath the cultural variants. Carr represented this view in his comparison between Tibetan and Euro-American NDEs. He agreed that "The shamanic journey has many analogs to the death process" (1993, p. 90). Carr noted many learned cultural differences, such as the Christian belief in forgiveness and peaceful Western NDEs, versus the fearfulness and the lack of dark tunnels in Tibetan visions; but he also saw more shared themes, such as the religious figures, the light, and a life review. Cultural relativism cannot explain the wealth of worldwide similarities (Carr, 1993).

The global phenomenology of NDEs and shamanic journeys is also supported by archetypal psychology, which points to worldwide appearances of symbolic invariant core experiences such as the light, the peace, the darkness, and local symbols of divinity, whether Jesus in the West or Buddha in the East (Yates, 1996). The key is to see the symbolism and avoid simplistic literal interpretations (Bailey, 1996). Epstein translated Tibetan *delog* texts and saw them as "fully consistent with the so-called classical shamanism of northern Asia" (1982, p. 60). Epstein was probably right that *delogs* as oracles and shamans are fringe elements in Tibetan culture and "are regarded historically by Tibetans as representing a stage of religious development surpassed and supplanted by, and morally inferior to, Buddhism" (1982, p. 61). I am unconvinced, however, by his further attempt to reduce the *delog* phenomena to "hallucinatory" (1982, p. 48) and "regressive" (1982, p. 73) instances of neoFreudian object-relations theory. I question his effort to reduce Avalokiteshvara to a mere "model of the maternal imago" (1982, p. 71) and the Lord of the Dead as the punishing superego, "an Oedipal figure *par excellence*" (1982, p. 72). In this schema, the *delog's* spiritual activity would be nothing but unconscious, infantile efforts to "reparent" others, in good Freudian style (Epstein, 1982). While such unconscious elements may be partly relevant, this interpretation risks becoming an ethnocentric projection of a Western neoFreudian theory, and an unnecessarily reductive denial of this religion.

On the other hand, psychoanalysis in general has positively influenced the theoretical context for interpreting NDEs by demonstrating through psychotherapy the reality and meaningfulness of the unconscious psyche. Taking the reality of unconscious images seriously is an essential first step in placing near-death phenomena in an interpretive framework that goes beyond the scientific, industrial cultural vision of literal truth, and adding to the discussion the realm of paradoxical and symbolic language.

In addition, Freud strengthened psychoanalysis with the scientific practice of withholding judgment. This judgment-withholding element of Western culture seems to have influenced NDEs themselves. Most contemporary Western NDErs do not encounter a fearful Lord of the Dead judging harshly, or nasty devils punishing sadistically. They are more likely to meet a kindly counselor who asks: "What have you learned in your life?" This is not fearful religious moralism, but thoughtful soul healing.

Our culture has passed our medieval stage of development and instituted mass education. This indoctrinates the masses with the basic rational and moral expectations of our civilization, so religion is not needed as much to scare us into behaving decently, although the capacity of mass education to reduce 20th century violence has been sadly limited. A new spiritual education and motivation is also needed. NDEs reflect our culture's type of consciousness, in which educated people do not respond well to a religious vision based on fear. NDEs, shamans, and *delogs* in different cultures will seem radically different, but they do reveal archetypal similarities reaching over vast ages and distances: the light takes many forms.

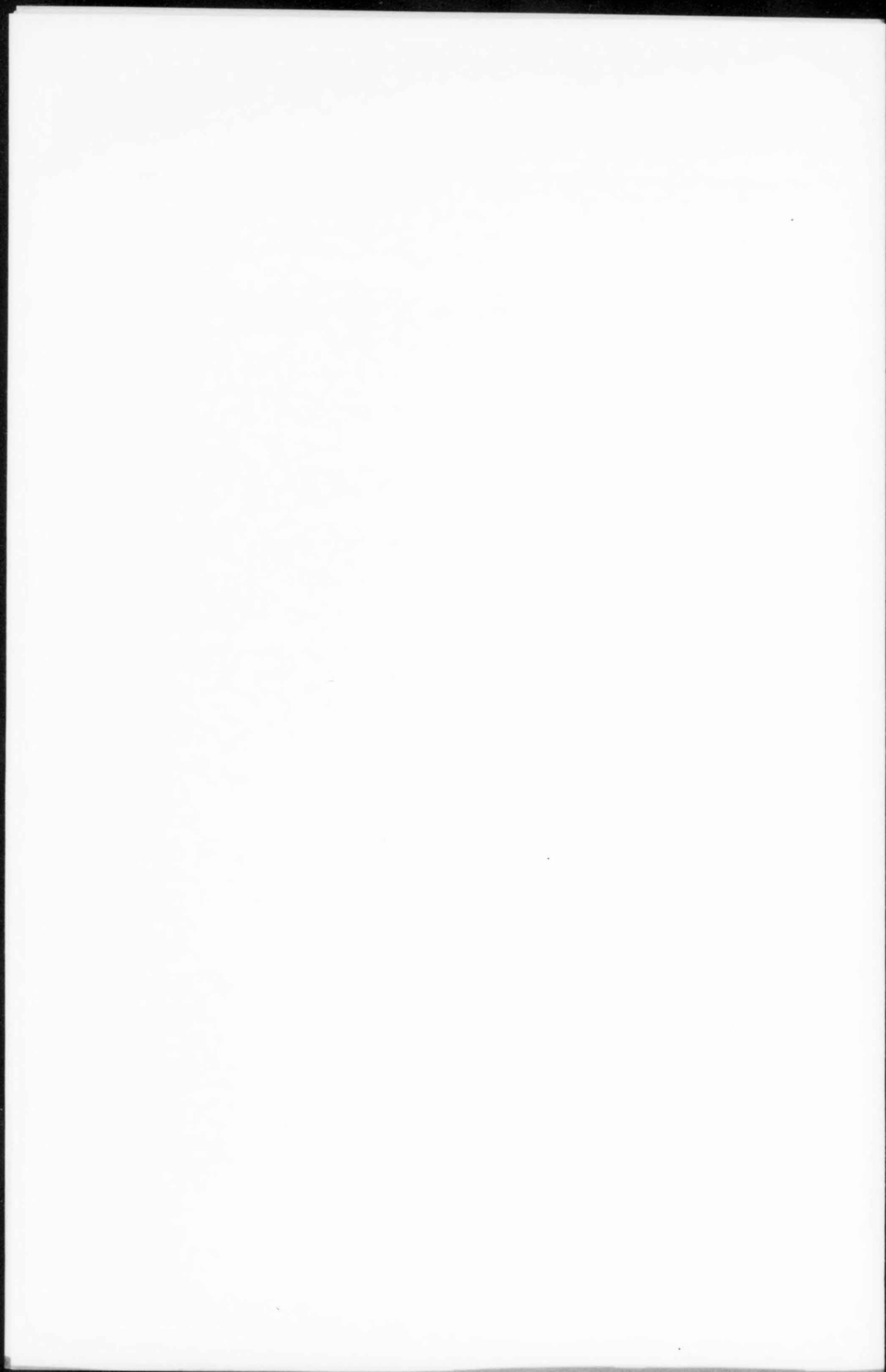
Finally, there is an underlying spiritual theme that needs to be addressed. The NDE phenomenon, *delog* visions, and shamanic journeys are spontaneous expansions far beyond our normal consciousness. These events are part of the postmodern questioning of the universal validity of the industrial ego. Industrialism promotes ego-consciousness, self-control, will, reason, logic, and materialism, but NDEs imply a fuzzy border between life and death, consciousness and unconsciousness, certainty and uncertainty, truth and falsehood. Echoing Buddhist themes, NDE-like phenomena often present themselves as revelations of a divine oneness in the universe that holds life and death in its amazing embrace. NDEs are a postindustrial, postmodern conundrum expanding Western consciousness beyond the narrow, shaky certainties of industrial consciousness and its associated traditional religions. We are witnesses of the awakening of a new spirituality, a healing global

deepening of soul that needs to blend the best of scientific thinking with the best of mystical spirituality.

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# Near-Death Experiences in Thailand

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**ABSTRACT:** Near-death experiences (NDEs) in Thailand do not demonstrate the episodes most noted in those collected in the West, but they do show consistent features. I argue that these features, including harbingers of death, visions of hell, the Lord of the underworld, and the benefits of making donations to Buddhist monks and temples, can be understood within the framework of beliefs and customs unique to Southeast Asia. The simplest explanation is that the phenomenology of NDEs at least in part fulfills the individuals' expectations of what they will experience at death. These expectations are most often derived from the experiencer's culture, subculture, or mix of cultures. Culture-bound expectations are, in turn, most often derived from religion. One case, quoted at length, shows features that suggest that the individual was experiencing stress as a result of living in both Thai and Chinese cultures. Although the phenomenology of Thai NDEs is at variance from those in the West, the typical episodes that appear in each seem to follow a comparable sequencing. This similarity in structure suggests that NDEs in both cultures have a common function.

**KEY WORDS:** near-death experience; Buddhism.

Several studies (Kellehear, 1993; Pasricha and Stevenson, 1986; Schorer, 1985–86) have indicated that the phenomenologies of near-death experiences (NDEs) are culture-bound. The observation that the "being of light" can appear differently according to a person's

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expectations of what God will be like (Osis and Haraldsson, 1975) supports the notion that a religion also plays a role. In this article, I will examine ten NDEs collected in Thailand, a culture with a very high degree of religiosity.

I will argue in support of the notion that the phenomenology of NDEs is not determined by a person's culture, but rather reflects that person's expectations of what death will be like. These expectations are most often, though not always, derived from a person's culture. Culture-bound expectations about death, whether held consciously or unconsciously, are in turn most often, but not always, derived from the culture's religious traditions. NDE phenomenology is both highly individualized, and at the same time shared by many people. Culture is universal, but so are deviations from its norms.

Thailand is an appropriate place to test the influence of culture on NDEs for several reasons. First, the indigenous culture is still the dominant culture. Except for a very brief period during its occupation by the Japanese, Thailand has never been colonized. In many cases, traditions begun in its classical period continue up to the present. Second, Thailand's religion is exceptionally uniform, with more than 95 percent of its people being raised in the Theravadin Buddhist tradition. Third, Thai popular ideas about death are derived largely from a single source, a still untranslated popular religious text called *Phra Malaya*, which is the name of a medieval monk whose "visions" of heaven and hell are described in it. I suspected that Thailand's relative cultural uniformity and absence of competing traditions on death and dying might engender consistent features in their NDEs that do not appear in those found in the West.

While living in Thailand for two years, I was able to gather many death-related images from that culture, and to learn enough about Thai beliefs to see that their concepts about death and dying were very different from those in the West. I speculated that these differences might have an influence on the phenomenology of near-death experiences (NDEs) in Thailand. Due to temporal and financial constraints, I was able to gather accounts of NDEs only from Thai popular literature rather than from first-hand interviews with NDErs. I was, however, able to participate fully in the translation process, and working with printed matter allowed me to make sure of the translations on a reliable word-by-word basis. I confined my study to those published NDE accounts that were transcribed from actual interviews or those provided by Dhebhanom Muangman, President of the Bangkok Institute

for Psychical Research and Advisor to the Governor of Bangkok, whose credentials allowed me to accept the reliability of the accounts he provided. These three sources yielded ten NDE accounts.

### Phra Malaya

The *Phra Malaya* is the only important source of Thai ideas and expectations about death and dying. There are alternate ideas to be found in the more strict classical Buddhist Dharma, but they are not well known by the general population. The *Phra Malaya* recounts the visions of heaven and hell experienced by a medieval monk (Phra Malaya) during his meditation. It first describes his descent into hell. There, he witnessed the hall in which Yama, the Lord of the Dead, assigned the souls of the dead to their appropriate rebirths. There were several options for rebirth available. A person could be reborn as a human with any social status and any degree of attractiveness, as any type of animal, into any one of fourteen hells, or into any one of nine heavens.

Phra Malaya then toured the hells, where he witnessed many specific tortures inflicted on those who had committed specific various types of sins. In the center of the hells was the court of Yama, the Lord of the Underworld, whom Phra Malaya saw judging both humans and animals. After that, he visited a number of heavens. One NDE account of heaven could easily be illustrated by graphics appearing in popular editions of *Phra Malaya*. The apocryphal Theravadin Buddhist texts, the *Vimanavatthu* (Horner, 1974) and the *Petavatthu* (Gehman, 1974), describe many of the same tortures that appear in the *Phra Malaya*. Both the heavens and the hells he saw bear strong similarities to those described in two Buddhist classical commentaries, the 12th-century *Abhidhammatta Sangaha of Acariya Anuruddha* (Bodhi, 1993) and the 14th-century *Vissudhimagga* of Buddhaghosa Acariya (Buddhaghosa, 1975). It is well worth noting that description of hell in the *Phra Malaya* also echoes the one given in the Hindu classical scripture, the *Shivapuranas* (Shastri, 1978).

After his tour of hell, Phra Malaya then saw two "future" periods, the "age of Migasanni," a sinful era dominated by violence, and the "time of Sri Ariya," a heavenly future where, among other things, wish-fulfilling trees will grow. These trees are said to produce whatever a person sitting under them wishes for, and to grow jewels instead of fruit. Illustrations accompanying the text also show all the inhabitants of this heaven as

being young and attractive, well-dressed, and always as couples looking very much in love. Phra Malaya also visited other levels of heaven, "The Abode of Brahma" and "The Abode of Indra," where the deities of Thai religion reside.

The *Phra Malaya* seems to have no analog in the Judeo-Christian world. A comparable situation would have been if Dante's *Divine Comedy* (Alighieri, 1955/14th century) were the sole source of Western concepts about death and dying, and that his descriptions of heaven and hell were given the status of absolute truth. Of course, there are differences between this scenario and the current Thai reality. In fact, there is an alternate set of teachings imported by the Chinese, but one which is quite similar, being also heavily influenced by Buddhist traditions. Chinese mythology also has multiple heavens and hells, and the Lord of the Underworld, Yama, appears in both traditions (Williams, 1976). Furthermore, Thailand's religious makeup is not absolutely uniform; there is a small minority of Christians and Muslims. Nevertheless, to imagine a Christian community which had no ideas about the experience of death not found in Dante's *Divine Comedy* might provide a helpful metaphor for understanding how death and dying are seen in the Thai cultural context. All the NDEs I found in Thailand demonstrated motifs for which I know of no local sources except the *Phra Malaya*, with the significant exception of the case of Kodien, which I will examine below.

### Yamatoots

One motif that occurs in nine of my ten cases of Thai NDEs is that of Yamatoots. Yamatoots are messengers sent from Yama's office, which Phra Malaya located in the center of hell, to take the dying person to see Yama. One account of a premortem visitation includes the gradual approach of a pair of Yamatoots. Yamatoots can have many different appearances. My cases include "two white-robed young men," a classical Yamatoot three times life size, and a group of three wearing turbans, while the most common instances are of a pair of Yamatoots that come to take the NDEr. Yamatoots state their business very directly in Thai NDEs. They are truly "fell sergeants and strict in their arrest." One told an NDEr that it was time to die and be taken for judgment. Another simply announced: "We've come to take you to hell." Two of my Thai accounts are of NDEs happening to the same people twice. In one of these cases, the same Yamatoot appeared twice. In Bangkok I saw a motorcycle safety poster showing two men on motorcycles, one weaving

wildly in and out of traffic, with a Yamatoot on the back of his bike, the other staying in line, with an angel for a passenger. Yamatoots appear often in Thai popular comics, advertisements, religious morality books and posters, and popular television.

### Making Merit

After the *Phra Malaya*, the next significant factor influencing Thai expectations of what it will be like to die is their beliefs associated with the custom of "making merit," or *tham boon*. The concept of merit is closely akin to, but not identified with, positive karma. Merit is often spoken of as the source of good luck, as a religious practice, and as a kind of moral currency. Any compassionate, wise, or generous action is said to create merit; but one of the most powerful ways to make merit available to the laity is by donating food, money, or clothing to the Buddhist monks. It is commonly believed that the best way to make merit, outside of becoming a monk, is to fund the construction of a temple, or failing that, to fund the repair or restoration of a temple (Wells, 1975).

I thought of my family, but I could not see any way to get back to them. The voice told me that I would not see them. It said that I could cry if I wanted. At these words I burst out crying. Then I saw a woman wearing green clothes. She had long hair, and spoke so sweetly. She said to me: "This is your food. Please eat it. We have a long walk ahead of us." I ate all of the food. There were fried eggs, an omelette, beef curry, chicken curry, and candied eggs. These were all my favorite foods, prepared just as my mother had made them for me. I was full after this, and I became thirsty. I told this woman that I wanted some water. She said that there was no water for me here, because I had never donated anything to drink to the monks or to a temple. I was very thirsty, and I thought that if I could regain my life, I would never forget to donate cool drinks to the monks I went to visit. After a long walk with this angelic woman, I came home, where I revived. I was so thirsty. (Suwannathat, n.d., Vol. 2, from chapter on pp. 171-203)

Merit seems to grow over time, being augmented by karmically-positive actions, but at the same time being eroded by sinful action, or *baap*. The types of behaviors considered to be sinful are the usual types cited in most religions, such as killing, gambling, theft, and adultery. A caption in a poster I purchased in a Bangkok religious supply shop reads: "Yama judges man and beast according to boon and baap." The accompanying illustration shows Yama seated next to a scale whose arms are hung with signs reading "boon" and "baap." The implication

is clear: merit and sin offset one another. One goes to heaven or hell according to the balance of the scales. How much merit a person has is less important than whether or not it outweighs one's burden of sin. The reviews of karma that occur in my collection of Thai NDEs are confined to examinations of single sins, as though their "next birth" were to be determined by either a single actions, or a specific behavioral pattern represented by a single action. Four of my ten cases include being accused of this sin by accountants reading from books, as if Yama's accountants were looking at only the balance due, in contrast to the panoramic life review in Western NDEs that covers all the transactions. This commercial metaphor becomes more apt when we realize that Yama's record-keepers are referred to as "accountants" in several NDEs.

I climbed these stairs and found myself in the judgment hall of Yama's palace. I knew that they were ready to judge me for my sins. A giant rooster appeared who told Yama that I had killed him. He emphasized that I had tried to kill him again and again. The rooster said that he remembered me exactly. An entire flock of roosters also appeared and testified that I had killed them, as well. I remembered my actions, and I had to admit that the roosters had told the truth. Yama said that I had committed many sins, and sentenced me to many rebirths, both as a chicken and many other kinds of birds. After these births, I would then be reborn as an angelic being (Thevada) due to my having performed meritorious actions many times. (Suwannathat, n.d., Vol. 2, from chapter on pp. 126-136)

### **Mistaken Identity**

Thai NDErs, like those from India, often report having been told that they were taken by mistake, that they were the wrong person, and that they must return to life. I will discuss this further below.

He then found himself in front of Yama, the lord of the underworld. Yama looked into a book in which his actions were written. Before the judgment could begin, Yama said that he was the wrong person and had to be taken back. The patient "sneaked" a look into the book, and he saw that it was written in Thai. Surprised, (possibly because he expected it to be written in Pali) he took a closer look, and saw the name of a person he knew from his village, with the date of his death written as three days after his own NDE. The man named in Yama's book did, in fact, die on the date named. (D. Muangman, personal communication, 1997)

Yama told me that I had committed a number of sins, especially in having butchered a number of chickens. I denied it, and said that I

had not done that, not even once. Yama was surprised, and asked his records-keeper, "How old is he?" "Thirteen years, lord," came the answer. "What's his name?" My name was read out. Yama said "You've taken the wrong man. Take him back." (Suwannathat, n.d., Vol. 2, from chapter on pp. 126-136)

Someone came to lead him into a building. . . . There were many people in the building. He was led to the right, and into a room with a large table in the center. There were three men sitting at the table, which had several stacks of books on it. The man sitting in the middle seemed to be the boss. The other two were looking into books opened before them.

After Kodien sat down, the one in the middle asked for his name and age. The boss asked the one on the right to check to see if it was correct. They found that it was not correct. The boss told the one on the left to take him back quickly, (Suwannathat, n.d., Vol. 3, from chapter on pp. 9-24)

## Karma

The laws of karma are apparently subject to interpretation in Thai NDEs. One case includes an account of a Yamatoot whose positive and negative karmas each created separate effects, while another includes an account of the effects of negative karma being canceled out by positive karma.

The Yamatoot . . . revealed that he himself had both merit and sins, so that he had to spend some of his days as an animal, and some as an angel. During his life, he had earned his money by torturing both men and animals. He promoted bullfights, cockfights, and boxing matches. Then, he said, he took the money, and used it to make donations, so that he could create merit. This merit helped him to become an angel, while the sins committed by encouraging these fights helped him to be an animal. (Suwannathat, n.d., Vol. 7, from chapter on pp. 103-114)

I . . . found myself in the judgment hall of Yama's palace. I knew that they were ready to judge me for my sins. A giant rooster appeared who told Yama that I had killed him. He emphasized that I had tried to kill him again and again. The rooster also said that he remembered me exactly. An entire flock of roosters also testified that I had killed them, as well. I remembered my actions, and I had to admit that the roosters had told the truth. Yama said that I had committed many sins, and sentenced me to many rebirths both as a chicken, and many other types of birds as well. . . . But, quite suddenly, an enormous turtle appeared. It screamed at Yama, saying, "Don't take him, he is a good human, and should be allowed to live." Yama answered the turtle: "What did he do to help you?" The turtle answered: "Long ago, I almost died because another of these humans wanted to eat me. This man prevented him, and so I was able to live out my life." Yama asked

the turtle if he had any evidence. The turtle asked to be turned upside down, and told Yama to look at his underside where he would see where the man had carved his name so many years ago.

Yama saw the man's name was there just as the turtle had said, and he believed the turtle's story. Yama announced that he was cancelling the sentence, and told me that when I revived, I was to take a vow not to kill any living thing. (Suwannathat, n.d., Vol. 2, from chapter on pp. 126-136)

Although most Thai Buddhists will agree that there are laws governing karma and its effects, there is neither agreement nor finality concerning the specific processes that occur when these laws are operating. This creates a diversity in the teachings that allows individuals a wide latitude in understanding how karma operates. I suggest that the idea of karma is used as a medium to explicate the "karmic effects" individuals unconsciously expect from their behavior during their lives, and that individual psychodynamics manifest in the specific operation of karma as it appears in any given Thai NDE. The most popular expression of the laws of karma in Southeast Asia is the formula: "Do good; receive good. Do bad; receive bad." I suggest that so long as this rule is preserved, NDErs in Southeast Asia can confabulate any "laws of karma" that can explicate their feelings about their lives without violating their religious paradigm. The supposition that the karmic review is a culture-specific example of the life review seems reasonable.

### **The Case of Kodien**

One of the most interesting cases of the effects of karma manifesting in an NDE is in the case of Kodien, a Chinese-Thai.

[Kodien] . . . came on a group of his friends who had died six or seven years ago. He realized that these were people who had died but had not yet been cremated. Now he understood that he was really dead. He came to a lawn in front of an office building where there were many groups of people with sad, pale faces. . . . He noticed that some of the groups had food and water, while others had only had piles of ash. He wanted to ask for some water, but he didn't know anyone who he could ask. He kept on walking until he saw one group where there was someone he knew. A friend who had died recently. His friend greeted him with a smile. He asked for something to eat. Kodien asked "Is this your food?" His friend said "Yes, but you can't eat any of it, because it doesn't belong to you. We cannot give any of it to anyone else. Your food is over there." Kodien's friend pointed to a pile of ash. Kodien said "How can I eat that?" His friend only laughed for an answer. Kodien said "You're just teasing me," and reached to take a drink of water

without waiting for permission [as is the custom in Thailand where hospitality is often taken for granted, especially in rural areas]. He found that the water was scalding. He asked his friend: "How can you drink it when it is so hot?" With a smile, Kodien's friend took the glass and drank it, saying that it didn't belong to Kodien. His friend said that those who made merit by donating food to the monks during their lives would have food, while those who only helped their own ancestors (by burning joss-paper replicas of food according to Chinese tradition) would only have piles of ash. Kodien realized that his friend was suggesting that he create merit according to the Thai custom, but during his life he had not believed in the practice. He had thought that the Chinese forms of religious observance were better, and had only made joss-paper offerings. Then someone came and asked Kodien's friend to come inside the building. Kodien sat down for a while, still thinking about food. Soon, someone came to lead him into the building as well. There were many people in the building. He was led to the right, and into a room with a large table in the center. (Suwannathat, n.d., Vol. 3, from chapter on pp. 9-24))

In this case, the Chinese merit-making practices Kodien followed were rejected in favor of the Thai practices. Kodien was a Chinese person raised in Thailand. His NDE seemed to reveal that he was actually more drawn to the Thai ways of creating merit than to those of his own family and subculture. That the NDE of a person torn between two cultures should exhibit features of both suggests that it is not culture alone that determines NDE phenomenology. Rather, NDEs may be determined more by one's expectations concerning what death will be like, even when those expectations are held subconsciously or are influenced by more than one culture. Significantly, Atwater (1994) has found that NDEs with visions of the classical Western hell are much more likely to occur in the Southeastern part of the United States, the so-called "Bible Belt," where the literal veracity of the Bible is often taken for granted.

The case of Kodien seems to rule out culture by itself as the determinative factor in shaping NDE phenomenology. His case reflected expectations drawn from two cultures. The fact that Thai (and Indian) NDEs do not follow the typical Western progression reflected by Kenneth Ring's (1980) temporal model seems to rule out the possibility that there is an ideal or normal NDE scenario, except within a particular cultural context.

### **Unique Features of Thai NDEs**

NDEs manifested within certain groups have shown characteristic variations. Pediatric NDEs (Morse, Conner, and Tyler, 1985), and those

of preliterate cultures (Kellehear, 1993), as well as those of India (Pasricha and Stevenson, 1986), and Africa (Morse and Perry, 1992) have been studied, and patterns can be discerned in each group. However, the most common approach to discussing their typical features has been to compare them to the typical Western NDE, to the pattern elucidated by Ring (1980). Accounts of Western NDEs would seem to be useless in helping Thais know what to expect at their deaths. There is some value in a structural comparison of Thai NDEs with Western ones, while a phenomenological comparison will show how much NDEs need to be interpreted in terms of each culture's own frame of reference for death and dying.

Tunnels are rare, if not absent, in Thai NDEs. The panoramic life review also appears to be absent. Instead, my collection shows people reviewing just a few karmically-significant incidents. Perhaps they are expressions of behavioral tendencies, the results of which are then experienced as determinative of their rebirths. These incidents are read out to them from a book in a kind of courtroom setting. There is no "being of light" in these Thai NDEs. The Buddha does appear, but only in a symbolic form, and in only one case:

I asked [the Yamatoot] to take me to see the Lord Buddha. I told him I needed to see The Buddha. The Yamatoot looked at the sky and pointed. "That big star," he said, "is The Buddha. And those little stars are the other enlightened ones; those who have followed the Dharma [the Buddhist teachings] to the end. I'm afraid you won't be able to see them in any other form. You are not pure enough." (Suwannathat, n.d., Vol. 2, from chapter on pp. 126-136)

Like the "being of light" in Western life reviews, Yama was present during this same NDE during its karmic review, which dealt only with the experiencer having killed chickens; but Yama is anything but a being of light. In popular Thai depictions, he is shown as a wrathful being, and is most often remembered for his power to condemn one to hell. Some of the functions of angels and guides (Lundahl, 1992) are also filled by Yama's servants, the Yamatoots. They guide, lead tours of hell, and are even seen to grant requests made by the experiencer.

### **Yamatoots and OBEs**

In Western NDEs, the most common initial phase is an out-of-body experience (OBE). In all ten of my Thai NDEs, the most common initial phase is a visitation by a Yamatoot, one of the servants of Yama. Dhebhanom Muangman provided me with an account of premortem

visions that included three separate visits by Yamatoots. The mythology of Yama and his servants was imported to Thailand from India along with much of the Hindu/Vedic pantheon, and it can still be found in contemporary Indian NDEs (Pasricha and Stevenson, 1986). Interestingly, OBEs in Thai NDEs tend immediately to precede meetings with Yamatoots. Phenomenologically, the appearance of a herald of death and an OBE could not be more disparate. The function of OBEs and Yamatoots could be the same: to convey the news that one has died. Every NDE I found in Thailand featured either a Yamatoot or someone else who came to "take" the NDEr. One account included a kind of rebellion by a Yamatoot:

Both of the [Yamatoots] were carrying torches. They looked about thirty years old, and had very dark skin. They only said: "Let's go." I asked them: "Where are you taking me?" They answered: "Don't ask." . . . One of them said to the other: "He is too young, so I'm not going to help you. You do it alone; I have another job to attend to. Eventually, the remaining Yamatoot forced me to go with him. (Suwannathat, n.d., Vol. 2, from chapter on pp. 126-136)

The OBE may rely on a specific neurological function. The neurosurgeon Wilder Penfield accidentally induced an OBE while stimulating the surface of a patient's brain with an electrode (Penfield, 1955). The OBE occurs in many contexts outside of NDEs. It has also been reported in meditation experiences, febrile delirium, shamanic "journeys," temporal lobe epilepsy, and dissociative disorders, and it can even occur spontaneously. During an autoscopic OBE, one still perceives the physical world, so it cannot validate culture-specific beliefs about postmortem experience. A person having an OBE will still perceive his or her surroundings. There are few reports, if any, of a person having an OBE while simultaneously seeing the being of light. Perhaps the recognition that one has died is easier if one experiences what one has been taught will occur at death. Thus, while an OBE may well be found in NDEs of all cultures, not all cultures recognize OBEs as a herald of death. Indeed, in one of our cases, a monk experiencing an NDE initially mistook his NDE-related OBE for one appearing in his meditation:

One night, close to midnight, he sat down to do vipassana meditation. He felt like he couldn't breathe, and he had heart palpitations. He began chanting in his mind "Being dead, being dead, being dead." He felt a change in his state of consciousness, and found himself looking at his body from outside. He found himself thinking that he had just left his body for a little while the way it can happen during meditation. He walked downstairs, and he saw 4 people standing at the bottom of the stairs. One of them said that a Yamatoot had told them to come

and take him. He was shocked. It was then that he realized that this was not a meditative out-of-body experience. He asked: "Am I dead?" (Suwannathat, n.d., Vol. 7, from chapter on pp. 103-114)

Some cultures seem to have anthropomorphic harbingers that inform the experiencer of his or her deaths independently of OBEs. Yamatoots, the Grim Reaper, and angels all have appeared as harbingers of death. Perhaps Yamatoots "back-up" OBEs.

It has been reported that hallucinatory phenomena are facilitated by altered states of consciousness (Horowitz and Adams, 1970). We might speculate that the altered state of consciousness that occurs in conjunction with OBEs can also facilitate anthropomorphic imagery that conveys the approach of death. If this were the case, then Yamatoots and OBEs would each have the same function: to make the person aware that he or she is dead.

This notion might also help to explain why tunnels, common in Western NDEs and having a possible neurological basis (Blackmore, 1993), are also largely absent in Thai NDEs. Tunnels might symbolize moving from one state of consciousness to another. Roads, or the act of walking, might symbolize the same thing in Thai and some Indian NDEs. Indeed, most of my collection features one or the other. One of my cases did feature a tunnel, but it did not occur at the beginning of the experience, as it most often would in Western NDEs. Rather, it appeared following an interview with Yama, who asked if the NDEr wanted to see hell. The experiencer answered "yes," and the entry into the first level of hell was made "by opening a tunnel."

### **Affect in Thai NDEs**

#### *Hell*

The light seems to be absent in Thai NDEs, as is the profound positive affect found in so many Western NDEs. The most common affects in my collection were negative. Unlike the negative affect in so many Western NDEs (Greyson and Bush, 1992), that found in Thai NDEs (in all but one case) has two recognizable causes: fear of "going" and horror and fear of hell. It is worth noting that although five of my ten cases included seeing hell and being forced to witness the same horrific tortures that appeared in the *Phra Malaya*, none included the NDErs having been subjected to any of these torments themselves. The same can be said about hell in medieval European NDEs (Zaleski, 1987).

The Yamatoots guided me to a torture chamber; one for those who had committed murder. I saw guards hitting the prisoners on the head with an iron hammer. People were being chopped into pieces. They re-assembled themselves, and were then chopped up again and again, until the karma acquired by killing people was exhausted. After this process was finished, their pieces were fed to dogs and vultures with iron beaks. The Yamatoot explained that these prisoners were not afraid of making bad karmas; that they actually liked killing people. This torture, he said, was the result of their murderous karmas. After these karmas were extinguished, they would be reborn as animals in the earthly plane of existence. In that life they would have to die by being killed. They would not be allowed to live out their natural life-span.

The Yamatoot then took me to another torture chamber. I saw a path made of hot coals. The guard was forcing people to walk this path. If someone could not bear the pain, and stopped walking, the guards would stab them with spears, and thus, force them to continue. This process was repeated until the person was burned up completely. First their feet, then their calves, then their knees, and so forth. Their bodies then returned to their previous state, and the whole process was repeated. The Yamatoot explained that this path of hot coals was for those who had too many defilements (Kilesa) and desires (Tanha).

We came to another torture area. These prisoners were punished by having their tongues put between red hot pincers. I thought: "This is so horrible." They could not bear their punishment, and some tried to escape. They would run to get a drink of water. As they tried to scoop it into their mouths, it was turned into scalding hot oil. In pain, they rolled around on the ground, but even as they did so, nails grew under them. The Yamatoot explained that they were being punished like this because, during their lives, they were liars and slanderers.

I then saw a grove of Niew trees. There were many of them. They had large trunks. At the bases of these trees there were naked people trying to climb up. Anyone who would not climb was stabbed by the spears the Yamatoots held. I then came to the hell for those who drank, took heroin, or opium. There were more people in this hell than any other I had witnessed so far. Some were being boiled in a copper pot. Other had been set on fire, while still others were being forced to drink acid. They tried to escape to find water, but when they did so, it turned into boiling oil. Some were able to escape, but those who succeeded found themselves harassed by vultures with iron beaks.

The Yamatoot said that this was the last place we would visit in hell. (Suwannathat, n.d., Vol. 2)

### *Heaven*

The deep feelings of bliss, ecstasy, and "the peace which passeth understanding" are not mentioned in my collection. The positive affects that do occur are those of pleasantness, comfort, a sense of beauty, and

happiness, while one experiencer spoke of his feeling that those whom he saw living in heaven were happy without mentioning his own feelings about being there. It is also worth noting that I have one case in which the experiencer saw only heaven, without also having seen hell. Most cases include both positive and negative affects. At least one similar case involving both heavenly and hellish elements in the West has already been noted in the literature (Irwin and Bramwell, 1988).

The Yamatoot asked me if I really wanted to see heaven. "If so, then you must contemplate the three treasures of The Lord Buddha, His Teachings, and the community of monks who follow his teachings. Concentrate your mind, pray, and you will go to heaven. After I closed my eyes and put my hands in the prayerful gesture, the Yamatoot disappeared and I was no longer in hell. I found myself in another place which was very pleasant. The weather was nice; I was no longer hungry. I saw a garden with trees all in rows. It was very beautiful, like the garden of a king or a millionaire. As I walked into the garden, I smelled some flowers. They were so very fragrant, with a scent I had never known before. Next, I saw some angels, both male and female. They glided through the air. They were dressed beautifully, and wore exquisite jewelry. Some had flowers in their hair. I kept walking, and saw a pavilion with a roof like that of a palace. There was an angelic man sitting inside. His body was surrounded by a green halo. I approached the angel, sat down and made obeisances. I asked: "Who are you? Where am I?" He answered: "I am the lord of the angels, and this is the angelic world." I then recognized that this was none other than Indra, the King of Heaven. He said to me: "When you go back to your world, you should teach your fellow men not to commit sins, as it causes them to go to hell. If they do good, and behave in a moral manner, they will be reborn in my heaven.

"I will show you the mercy of teaching you the Dharma, the sacred law." He imparted this knowledge by opening my wisdom eye. I then saw all the truths of the universe. The future, the past, and the present. After six earthly days, Indra told me that he would take me to another level of heaven, The World of Brahma. I saw Brahma, the creator of the universe. His face was similar to Indra's, with a fresh, clean look about it that indicated mercy, compassion, loving kindness, and equanimity. He had a golden halo. Brahma explained that the angels in his level of heaven were all on their way to take new births in the ordinary world. Therefore, there were many houses that were empty. He was waiting for those who had created much merit during their lives to take rebirth there, but they were very few. Those who were there had mostly been monks who had been strict in their observance of the monastic rule.

"You have been separated from your body for 7 days," he said. "If you don't return soon, you will not be able to." (Suwannathat, n.d., Vol. 2)

### Dead Friends and Relatives

Dead friends and relatives do appear in Thai NDEs, but in contrast to Western NDEs, these dead friends do not greet the dying person. Instead, in three of the four cases where the motif occurred in my collection of Thai NDEs, the dead friends seemed to inform the dying person of the rules governing the afterlife.

[I was taken] . . . to the next level of heaven. There, I found many of my old friends. Most of whom were soldiers. They were very happy to see me. I thought that this was where I was going to be forever. They did not know that I would revive. There were 10 people. Some of them gave me food and water. Others took me to see even more friends. Some of them were sleeping on a bed. All of them were feeling bad because they were separated from their families.

I asked them, "Where is my bed?" They said, "There is no bed for you here because this is not your home. Your home is in the next level up. It's better up there." I asked them to make a temporary bed for me, but they said that it was impossible. "We have only two pieces of wood, and only two nails." I said, "Never mind. I'm in a hurry. I must go now." (Suwannathat, n.d., Vol. 2)

Five of the 10 Thai NDEs in my collection included the experiencers being told that they were the wrong person, and being ordered back to life. In contrast, Western NDEs often end with the person choosing to return. Westerners might also find themselves spontaneously returning to their bodies, as also happens in Thai NDEs. It appears that, whereas Westerners might choose to revive, Thais and Indians are forced to revive. The Thai and Indian cultures do not reward independence and individuality the way Westerners do. Instead, these cultures encourage dependence on one's family, village, traditional religion, and so on. The idea that one has a choice about living or dying does not fit well in a culture where, traditionally, one cannot choose one's spouse, work, religion, or where to live. Parents arrange their children's marriages; children follow in their fathers' footsteps; live near your parents, if not with them; and worship in the same place and in the same way as the rest of the family. If the course of crucial life changes are imposed on Thais and Indians, will they not be more likely to confabulate being forced to revive than choosing to revive? One case in my collection ended with the NDEr being physically pushed into reviving.

A man dressed in black clothing came, and told Kodien to walk with him. The man walked in front, with Kodien walking behind. He led Kodien down a different road than the one he had taken on his way in.

This one was lined with trees, and was partly overgrown with grass. It was deserted. After a while they came on an old, sun-bleached water buffalo skeleton with a puddle of water next to it. Kodien was still thirsty, and sat down, intending to drink. Just as his hand was about to reach the water, he felt the man in black pushing him into the water from behind. At that instant, he blacked out. When he regained consciousness, he found himself in his coffin, and heard the sound of his own funeral. (Suwannathat, n.d., Vol. 3, from chapter on pp. 9-24)

Another motif that appears in Thai NDEs occurred in two of my ten cases. In these instances, the NDE ended with the person falling, and regaining consciousness upon hitting the floor or ground. The return to normal consciousness emerges as a separate theme, not to be confused with the decision to return to life.

One morning in 1982, while brushing his teeth, Sanit Tahnarat passed out for reasons unknown. He had an OBE in which he saw his own body, unconscious on the floor. He saw clouds approach him, and he was able to take hold of one. He found it was as hard as a stone. He climbed onto it, and sat down. The cloud carried him up to one of the heavens. He saw it was filled with diamonds and jewels. He moved up to another heaven, and saw that it had people dressed like angels. He wanted to see more, so he climbed up the clouds until he came to another plane. There were no people there, just spiritual lights. He heard a voice calling "grandfather" four times. At this, his hands became limp so that he could no longer hold on. As this happened, the cloud disappeared, and he fell to earth. When he hit the ground, he revived and found someone doing CPR on him. (Suwannathat, n.d., Vol. 1, from chapter on pp. 86-93)

I asked the Yamatoots to wait a while, because I had to tell my family that I was dead. I told them: "Nobody knows I'm here." I walked to my house, stood in front of it for a minute, and then went inside. I saw there were a number of people there, and all of them were crying. I saw my husband and daughter sitting together. I tried to run to them, but I tripped on something. I fell. As I hit the floor, I revived. (Vissudhikoon, 1989, p. 146)

### Conclusion

While some of the most common phenomenological features found in Western NDEs are either absent or rare in Thai NDEs, there are meaningful correlations that can be drawn. Typical phases appear in both, and with some typical order. Whereas Western NDEs often begin with travel through a tunnel to be greeted by dead friends and relatives, Thai NDEs usually begin with Yamatoots guiding the experimenter on a tour of hell. Thai NDErs may encounter Yama or more often

his assistants, the Yamatoots, rather than the being of light and angels reported in Western NDEs. Thai NDEs typically include a review of important karmas rather than a Western-style comprehensive life review, and a tour of hell and heaven rather than a transcendent experience. Whereas Western NDErs may reach a "point of no return" and choose to return to life, Thai NDErs are typically told they were taken because of a clerical mistake and told to return to the body.

The possibility arises that the same process occurs in both Western and Thai NDEs, and that the only significant differences are in terms of their culturally-derived phenomenological features. It may be that NDEs of all cultures share common patterns, but that these patterns are obscured by the different cultural phenomena through which they manifest. These Thai cases support the idea that NDEs may be characterized partly as subjective events occurring within specific contexts, in which individuals commonly use culturally-derived patterns to confabulate individualized death-process phenomena that serve common psychological functions.

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## BOOK REVIEW

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**The Division of Consciousness: The Secret Afterlife of the Human Psyche**, by Peter Novak. Charlottesville, VA: Hampton Roads Publishing Company, 1997, 258 pp, \$14.95, pb.

A very personal theology can emerge as a result of an individual's deepest grief. Experiencing despair, hopelessness, or anger enables a person to delve into those inner emotions we sometimes neglect when life appears to be going well.

Just such an emotionally shattering experience caused Peter Novak to write *The Division of Consciousness*. Novak's young wife died just a few months after the birth of their daughter, and he was gripped by a devastating grief. Three dreams of his wife's seeming "progression" in the afterlife helped him adjust to losing her. The last dream, occurring years after her death, was the impetus for him to investigate the concepts of death and life after death.

Not satisfied with what he regarded as the two traditional views of life after death—the heaven/hell duality and reincarnation—he began a serious search into the sacred writings of various world religions past and present, Freudian and Jungian psychology, Swedenborgianism, near-death experiences, past-life regressions, contemporary science, and the recent discoveries at Nag Hammadi and an increased understanding of Christian Gnosticism. After he collected and sifted extensive data from these studies, his theory of the division of consciousness emerged. Taking his cue from the Native American *ni* and *nagi*, the Egyptian *ba* and *ka*, and the ancient Chinese *hun* and *p'o* concepts, and finding what he believes to be an understanding of "division" in ancient Zoroastrianism, classical Greek writings, Swedenborg's visions, and various

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philosophers and psychologists, he concluded that at death there is a "division" of the individual, which results in the separating of the tripartite nature of the individual: body, soul, spirit. These arguments are succinct and, except for a few instances of debatable data interpretation, easily support his tenet.

For many in the West, the difference between the soul and the spirit is not clearly delineated. In fact, many use the terms interchangeably. Novak understands the soul to be the unconscious, the seat of the instincts, the feeling, subjective part of the individual; while he sees the spirit as the conscious, the seat of the "free mind," the thinking, objective part of the individual. Prior to this "division," he concludes, humanity "would have possessed a complete and unbroken mental record going all the way back to its very beginnings" (p. 66). There existed a Primordial Unity of the soul, which divided when the spirit asserted a dominance over the soul, causing the soul to be sublimated and "unconscious." Thus, the original separation of humanity from the divine would have been that time when the soul was unable or unwilling to provide the necessary negative inputs, a process of free will that resulted in the soul submerging to the unconscious. The varied myths of a deity or deities struggling over chaos were attempts at explaining this split.

From this understanding, Novak expands his theory to include the classic Christian concepts of the Fall, Original Sin, Redemption, theodicy, the Resurrection of Jesus, and the Resurrection of the physical body. In his explanation as to how the division theory helps to explain, and in some cases even simplify, traditional Christian theological tenets, he maintains a consistent point of view. It is at this point that many of the more conservative readers might find objections. Whether or not one agrees with his basic premise, his approach of delineating and defending the division of consciousness is logical and consistent.

Novak writes not only from the heart but also from extensive research into areas not normally conquered by laypeople or a nonacademic student of religion. Though his research emerged as a result of personal experience, his scholarship is evident, as he interprets data from an eclectic, widely varied wealth of information. His book is an exhaustive compilation of the thoughts of many, throughout the world and throughout the ages, upon the timeless questions of life and death and the mysteries of the next life.

Is his division theory a true picture of humanity? That, of course, must be answered by the individual. Even Novak admits that his conclusions do not come from a vision from God or other heavenly source. Whether

or not one agrees with Novak's conclusions, the reader will find a wealth of information to supplement and challenge old concepts and theories.

Any seeker of truth should read *The Division of Consciousness*. This book will help the beginning researcher to form a basis for deeper study and will challenge the advanced researcher to go beyond personal biases as the search for truth continues.



# Letters to the Editor

## More on Psychomanteum Experimentation

To the Editor:

I usually do not respond to material printed in journals, but I feel obligated to speak out about my concern in regard to a letter in the Winter 1998 issue of the *Journal*, entitled "Risks of Psychomanteum Experimentation" (Brodsky, 1988). Like Beverly Brodsky, I too agree with some of Bruce Greyson's (1996) cautions regarding the use of the psychomanteum, as presented in his review of Raymond Moody and Paul Perry's *Reunions* (1993). What I must strongly object to is the publication of Brodsky's letter, because the material presented was extremely slanted. The consequences of utilizing a psychomanteum listed by Brodsky totally misrepresent this device and are inaccurate.

Brodsky wrote that she found "the mirror's capacity for calling upon and being visited unawares by spirits, to be personally chilling" (p. 142). She then added that, after she and a couple of her friends performed their own experiments with a psychomanteum, several of these individuals were plagued with a variety of traumas, ranging from severe emotional distress to physical ailments. She continued by suggesting that the break-up of a marriage for one of the participants was also related to the psychomanteum experience: "Even sadder was the fate of the third participant, a near-death experiencer who seemed to be very stable and well adjusted prior to this time, despite the rape and murder of her teenage daughter several years ago. Her marriage . . . broke up, and her daughter, the twin of the murdered daughter who was visited in the psychomanteum, ran off with a man who had previously been jailed for kidnaping her" (p. 142).

As a clinician who has worked with thousands of trauma survivors across the nation and who has published six books on topics related to this issue, I will agree that experimentation with the psychomanteum, along with near-death experiences, out-of-body experiences, kundalini meditation, past-life regression, guided visual imagery, hypnosis, therapeutic empty chair work, after-death communication experiences, and

a whole host of other psychologically or spiritually based activities can trigger for the participants strong emotions, unresolved grief issues, inner conflict, confusion, and existential crisis, and even repressed traumatic experiences. I have spent most of my professional life exploring trauma, and I am fully aware that experiences in the here and now are very capable of pulling up, from the consciousness or unconscious, feelings related to past trauma experiences (see Wills-Brandon, 1990). And, as a result of this, some individuals can act out with addictive behavior, self-destructive actions, and many other dysfunctions. There will always be consequences to any form of personal growth activity. How these consequences are handled is dependent upon the mental health of the individual at that time.

To state or insinuate that the psychomanteum or any other such activity is directly responsible for the consequences presented in this letter is, in my opinion, extremely inaccurate; and for the Journal to publish this letter is concerning. Material such as this tells only part of a much more involved story and gives the reader a very biased presentation. Also, such action encourages the author and reader to focus on the psychomanteum as the total basis for psychological distress, preventing the resolution of the true causes of such triggered consequences. The publication of Brodsky's letter has distracted the intense psychological stress of a murder, rape, divorce, or kidnaping off these tragedies and placed it squarely on the shoulders of the psychomanteum experience.

The psychomanteum did not create the psychological difficulties discussed in Brodsky's letter. What it did do is act as a catalyst for difficulties that were already present before the experience. As an individual who deals with trauma survivors weekly, I can tell you that mundane experiences such as listening to the radio, watching a movie, or reading a book can create a great deal of emotional pain for trauma survivors who have not completely worked through the pain of their loss, abuse, anger, or grief. The environment is full of triggers capable of revealing pain that was once forgotten.

I hope that in the future, all the facts of a situation such as this will be explored completely before being presented in a forum such as the Journal.

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### Beverly Brodsky Responds

To the Editor:

In response to Carla Wills-Brandon's concerns about the possibility that negative reactions following the psychomanteum experimentation are caused solely by objective, external triggers, I reiterate the final statement in my previous letter (Brodsky, 1998) that cause and effect cannot be proven in these cases. I wish only to echo Raymond Moody's point in the closing pages of *Reunions* (Moody and Perry, 1993) that this is truly a Pandora's box that should be respected as such, and not approached with an atmosphere of naive playfulness, which I feel he encourages.

Pharmaceuticals like tobacco and peyote were used as sacraments for centuries in Native American traditions with no evidence of addiction, abuse, or emotional harm, because their culture brought the user safely through what might have been dangerous experiences for the novice. Millennia of denial and suppression have cut off Western culture from knowledge used by the ancients in their prophetic temples. The psychomanteum is a powerful window peering through a glass darkly at the abyss between life and death. Its use would be more responsible in a healing, supportive context such as Moody has arranged in his Theater of the Mind or as part of transpersonal therapeutic grief work.

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### **EMDR, ADCs, NDEs, and the Resolution of Loss**

To the Editor:

I commend Allan Botkin for publishing his interesting and provocative article in the Spring 2000 issue of the Journal on inducing after-death communications (ADCs) using eye-movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR). EMDR is an exciting addition to other methods of treating post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). And that someone else has linked EMDR to near-death experiences (NDEs) and ADCs is extremely exciting to my wife, Sharon Horacek, and to me. Sharon is a trained level I and level II practitioner of EMDR and she and I presented a paper at the EMDR International Association Conference held in Las Vegas in June, 1999, in which we discussed using EMDR to treat the traumatic and stressful events that often trigger NDEs, trauma sometimes associated with NDEs themselves, and trauma connected with some of the aftereffects of NDEs (Horacek and Horacek, 1999). Our paper included detailed information on using EMDR with near-death experiencers. Also, Sharon has used EMDR in numerous other situations involving trauma, including persons suffering PTSD grief reactions.

Botkin's article gave a detailed and clear description of how EMDR developed and how he has used it to induce ADCs in several clients. But I do have a couple of concerns about some of his views on NDEs and, especially, his understanding of grieving and his view that EMDR-induced ADCs have brought about the "complete resolution of loss" in his clients. My concerns do not detract from my view that Botkin is involved in a very important treatment modality that shows great promise for offering comfort to griever who are exhibiting PTSD symptoms.

My first concern involves Botkin's view of what constitutes an NDE. He wrote about the sequence of events in NDEs originally described by Raymond Moody (1975): "It should be noted that the sequence is not invariant, and frequently *only one* or a few of the elements are reported" (Botkin, 2000, p. 206, italics added). This is a curious definition of NDEs

to use in a research article, rather than using one of the two well-known weighted scales commonly used to quantify NDEs with minimum cutoff scores to define an NDE (Greyson, 1983, 1990; Ring, 1980). One robin does not make a spring. If the one characteristic NDE element a person reports is leaving the body or entering a tunnel, then that experience is generally called an *out-of-body experience* or a *tunnel experience* rather than an NDE. Experiencing one element or just a few would usually not come close to meeting the minimum cutoff score to qualify as an NDE on either standard scale. In the research literature, out-of-body or tunnel experiences or events comprised of just a few typical NDE features are also sometimes referred to as *NDE-related* or *NDE-like* phenomena. Consequently, some clients that Botkin might have called NDErs might not qualify as such if a more precise and accurate measure were applied.

My second concern is more serious than the first because it involves what Botkin claimed was the outcome of his EMDR-induced ADCs. No less than 13 times Botkin wrote that inducing ADCs led to the "complete resolution of grief" or the "complete resolution of the loss." Since this claim was repeated so often and included in the article abstract, one would expect that Botkin would first have explained what that phrase means and second have included both evidence of such resolution and references to important works on grieving that back up Botkin's understanding of and conclusions about the grieving process. However, his article contained no references to the research literature on grief, and his conclusions were simply stated as such with little supportive evidence. I realize that Botkin was writing as a clinician rather than as a researcher, but clinical impressions should be supported by additional evidence to bolster radical conclusions.

Throughout his article, Botkin seemed to use the phrases "complete resolution of grief" and "complete resolution of loss" interchangeably. But current understandings of grieving do not tend to identify acute grief reactions as constituting the entire grieving process. The model that Botkin seemed to accept views grieving as a time-limited process in which one is gradually healed and returned to "normal." In that view, one could work through or resolve acute grief responses such as anger and guilt and eventually end or complete the grieving process. That model, which has its roots in the work of Sigmund Freud (1917/1957) and Erich Lindemann (1944), was popular in the 1970s and 1980s in the works of Colin Murray Parkes (1972), John Bowlby (1980), William Worden (1982), Beverly Raphael (1983), and Therese Rando (1984). Lindemann argued that "uncomplicated" grieving should be completed in four to six weeks. By the middle 1980s this time limit was extended to six months to a year or more. As early as 1984 a blue-ribbon committee

sponsored by the National Academy of Science's Institute of Medicine reviewed grief research up to that point and concluded that there was no clear, fixed end point for the grieving process, that for many people the process continues for a lifetime, and that the process is much more complicated than early grief theorists thought (Osterweis, Solomon, and Green, 1984).

The latter part of the 1980s and the 1990s saw an explosion of research on this issue that pointed out that, although one can resolve acute grief reactions and adapt to the loss, nevertheless a basic sense of loss continues and a continuing relationship with the deceased loved one persists (Horacek, 1991, 1995; Klass, Silverman, and Nickman, 1996). C. S. Lewis (1963) wrote, in describing his grief over the death of his wife, that the basic sense of loss is like an amputation or dismemberment. That is, a person who has a leg amputated might work through a series of grief reactions, learn to function without the use of the leg, and adapt to the loss; yet to the extent that each morning the person wakes up to the experience that the leg is still missing, the basic sense of loss continues indefinitely.

Botkin claimed that inducing ADCs led to the complete resolution of grief and the complete resolution of the loss. I can accept that EMDR-induced ADCs can completely resolve the trauma associated with grief reactions; that is what EMDR is all about. But it is difficult for me to accept from Botkin's description that these ADCs completely resolve the basic sense of loss for his clients and that this aftereffect continues after the sessions. In the five cases Botkin summarized, there was no direct quotation from his clients that resolution of the basic sense of loss occurred. It may have been Botkin's clinical impression that that occurred, but he did not provide convincing evidence in his clients' words. Resolving grief trauma is not the same as resolving the basic sense of loss, and Botkin's clients did not report that they no longer missed their deceased loved ones.

Again, I think that Botkin's use of EMDR-induced ADCs shows great promise for offering comfort to grieverers exhibiting PTSD symptoms associated with the loss of a loved one. But I am unconvinced that such a method can completely resolve the basic sense of loss.

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### Allan Botkin Responds

To the Editor:

I thank Bruce Horacek for having taken an interest in my article. I welcome the opportunity to provide further clarification.

First, the findings I presented were derived from clinical observations, not from research. My goal in publishing the article was simply to share the induction technique with others. I have some confidence that other therapists trained in eye-movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR) who follow the procedure as described will

achieve similar outcomes. So far, interested colleagues have been able to induce after-death communications (ADCs) reliably after some instruction. My hope is that other professionals will test my clinical observations in a more rigorous and scientific manner.

Second, I am aware that my conclusions are not consistent with current thinking in the field. However, my ideas are new, not old. Although I do not believe that a sense of loss is generally time limited, I used the terms *grief* and *loss* in an interchangeable manner because, when it comes to ADCs induced with EMDR, there is no difference. Both acute grief and a lifelong sense of loss respond equally well to the procedure. In fact, a high percentage (more than 40 percent) of my cases (more than 500) are clearly not acute grief reactions, and in these cases, there are also no associated symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder. These patients were treated for a sense of loss that continued for many years (sometimes decades) after they had successfully worked through their acute phase of grief. In short, whether acute grief or a protracted sense of loss is involved, grief/loss is resolved by an ADC induced with EMDR.

An important distinction will perhaps further clarify this issue. I now regret not including this discussion in my article. I believe that there are two levels of a sense of loss. The more painful and deeper level is a feeling of disconnection, a realization or feeling that our loved one is gone. ADCs induced with EMDR provide survivors with an experiential reconnection that resolves this deep pain. It should be obvious, however, that even in these cases, nothing can bring our loved one back to life as we generally know it, and certain life experiences, such as waking up in the morning together or holidays, can no longer be shared in the usual way. The loss of these shared activities does not fully resolve with an ADC. However, having resolved the deeper sense of loss with an induced ADC, the loss of shared activities, even at the most difficult times, becomes more tolerable, and survivors are able to experience positive feelings and memories of the deceased, as well as more fully enjoy their relationships with surviving loved ones.

I am grateful that Horacek's well-intended and scholarly criticisms provided me an opportunity to further clarify a very important aspect of my report. Although all prior feedback has been positive, I expect that some future responses may be less well-intended, and perhaps some even hostile. Skepticism will take a variety of forms. Nevertheless, I feel compelled to take the risk. It seems to me that EMDR-induced ADCs have the potential to alleviate a great deal of suffering. It is my

hope that others, both EMDR trained therapists and clients/patients, will put their beliefs on hold long enough to give it a try.

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### Religious Wars in the NDE Movement

To the Editor:

I heartily commend the Editor and the editorial board of the *Journal* for their airing of the controversy surrounding the NDE "religious wars" in the Summer 2000 issue (Ring, 2000; Sabom, 2000). This is a courageous stance, especially given the subject matter, but it is one of infinite value to everyone interested in near-death experiences. As a scholar serving on the editorial boards of several other juried journals, I was overjoyed to see what is all too rare in most academic periodicals: creating a public forum where the internecine conflicts among leading thinkers are accessible to the larger community.

Clashes among researchers take place in every field. All too often, however, they remain private, creating an elite cognoscenti who "really know" what is going on, leaving the rest of the community far behind. Thus the most interesting conversations either happen between privileged individuals or not at all. The result is a spurious image of unification (the proverbial elephant in the living room), apparently uncritical acceptance of conflicting ideas, an uninformed public, and rather dull journals. To avoid critique and debate is to deprive the larger community of the greatest benefits of fine minds: their contribution to discernment into the heart of the issues.

As someone who deplores hidden religious agendas in any transpersonal field (Wade, 1999), I am particularly glad to see the subject out in the open, especially when it is debated by such esteemed scholars as Kenneth Ring and Michael Sabom in a respectful and professional manner. Although I found myself more in sympathy with Ring's views and generally concur with his position, Sabom's riposte was very effective. He made some excellent points, and cut away some of the thrust of Ring's arguments, though Sabom appeared to be somewhat selective in

what he addressed. If anything, I was sorry not to see a rejoinder from Ring to Sabom's rebuttal, as is usual in such instances. I know from private conversations that he could have marshaled a staunch defense to at least some of Sabom's critique, but I understand Ring declined the opportunity to do so in advance. The larger NDE community is the loser for Ring's decision, but I hope others will further and deepen the conversation Ring and Sabom initiated.

I would also like to take this opportunity to underscore what I consider one of the most significant ideas emerging from this debate, which may be somewhat lost in the religious discussion: Ring's retraction of his earlier position that somehow a critical mass of altered-state experiences such as NDEs heralded the coming of a golden age of higher planetary consciousness. In our earliest professional correspondence, Ring and I debated this issue, and I urged him to make his new thinking public. Knowing it would be an unpopular stance in the NDE community, he was understandably reluctant. But another impediment was not having an appropriate forum in which to air such a change of mind. Years passed. Had this opportunity not arisen in the *Journal of Near-Death Studies*, the public would have been deprived of a significant new direction taken by one of its most prominent and influential thinkers, perhaps forever.

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To the Editor:

For more than two decades, starting with the founding of the International Association for Near-Death Studies (IANDS), it has been

fascinating for me to be associated with the foremost students of the near-death experience (NDE). I had been impressed that this subject continued to be challenging, with new perspectives and broadening views beyond the earliest reports of Raymond Moody (1975). The Summer 2000 issue of the Journal was startling in presenting what may be a serious controversy, with two of our most highly respected scholars confronting the religious implications of the NDE (Ring, 2000; Sabom, 2000). My careful reading of the entire issue leads me to inject my own reactions as an admitted member of a small minority Christian denomination with a unique qualification, the Swedenborgian church, based on Emanuel Swedenborg's voluminous descriptions of the life after death, based on "things heard and seen" in the spiritual world from 1745 to 1772.

Swedenborg's most extensive of all experiences clearly presaged descriptions by those who have "died and then recovered," and verified the astonishing accounts of many thousands of resuscitated experiencers who report being "separated" from their lifeless bodies, observing the mourners around the corpse, a transition into an indescribably beautiful realm, encountering those previously deceased and a "being of light," and other supernal incidents, before returning to awaken their empty bodies—and, above all, sensing a transformation resulting from their incredible adventure. It would be difficult to argue that these were not religious experiences. Then why the controversy?

At the risk of oversimplifying, the disagreement pits Kenneth Ring's concept of resuscitated experiencers asserting that they found themselves on "the road to Omega" against Michael Sabom's questioning whether this constitutes a glimpse into Heaven without meeting the qualifications set forth in his creed. Each wrote and published his interpretation, based on thoughtful research, but citing opinions subject to personal interpretation. Both adversaries have influenced those active in the field of exploring the higher level of consciousness.

The Swedenborgian view is unique in several aspects, and I would advance the teachings I accept as an inspired revelation simply because both Ring and Sabom are correct. I will confine my remarks to just five of the reasons why the interpretation of the NDE is open to personal points of view. Parenthetically, we should remember that, for the most part, although experiences have been recounted by those who have "been there," all of those narrators had *turned back* at the "barrier" they encountered, usually for a reason important for themselves.

First, Swedenborg has assured his followers that the Lord is meticulously careful in providing "welcoming spirits" who know how to welcome a new arrival in a way that will not be disturbing or overwhelming.

These welcoming spirits often accommodate themselves to the ideas in the dying person's mind about what to expect at the time of death. Thus, some experiencers assert that they saw a "being of light" beyond description, a representation of the infinite God who might be the judge of their earthly behavior. Others say that they clearly saw "Jesus Christ," based on artistic depictions or their own imaginations. Others say that they encountered "Mary," whose special role made her primary in their worship; while still others declare only that it was "a light, far brighter than any light on earth, but it did not hurt my eyes." This encounter, and other events, are generally harmonious with their beliefs, because only after a time of preparation will the new arrival at last be capable of grasping the realities of the spiritual world.

Second, despite heavenly scenery and beauty, or even the horrors of frightening NDEs, the near-death experiencer has not yet entered either Heaven or Hell. Swedenborgian teachings make clear that we humans are not yet capable of the adjustment to the final realms for which we were born. We will progress first through a series of preparatory steps accommodating us to a world without time or space, in which we are unable to lie or dissemble, where our inner natures can be brought out. There, if we are good folk, we can reject our false ideas and secret sins; or if we really prefer evil and perversion, we will freely choose a "downward path." After preparation, we will gravitate to that place in the afterlife in which we finally feel "at home."

Third, experiencers admit that they cannot accurately describe the spiritual world, any more than we can really tell someone about our dreams. The higher realm is not easily described, and often experiencers admit that, although their experience was valid, "not a dream but real," it is elusive when they try to write about it.

Fourth, all of our human languages are imperfect. Even our daily experiences are sometimes ineffable, and it is not easy for experiencers to explain to others how it was that they could fly, that things appeared or disappeared, and that they encountered other "beings," including long-deceased relatives.

And fifth, it is surprising to observe that after hearing literally hundreds of NDEs, that experience can be said to be "nondenominational" in that it just does not bear out our religious teachings. We cannot differentiate between the experiences of an atheist who died in an automobile accident and a devout Methodist undergoing a particularly risky abdominal operation. The experiences do not conform to preconceived notions about Heaven or Hell; the angelic beings we encounter have no halos, wings, or harps, just as the tormenting spirits have no

horns or pitchforks. We will join a wonderful "heavenly choir" only if on earth our special delight was rehearsing and performing marvelous ecclesiastical music. Do not expect ghostly or nebulous visions of other-worldly inhabitants. But most importantly, Swedenborg emphatically and repeatedly declared that the Lord does *not* throw anyone into Hell, baptized or not; for the truth is that He loves *all* His creatures, and only allows those to choose the alternative place who will be happier there than they could ever be in His true kingdom.

There is a great deal more that could be said, some of which I have written about previously (Rhodes, 1982, 1997) and lectured about, but I advance these ideas simply because I feel very strongly that misconceptions can profoundly becloud the controversy derived from the fine articles in the Journal. Yes, we will have differences of opinion and unlike interpretations. But be patient; we will all find out in due time. These observations are clearly not in agreement with what most churches teach about the life after death, which is why many experiencers say that they become more religious yet stop going to church, because conventional ideas about resurrection "just don't make sense."

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To the Editor:

The clash of the titans transpiring in the Summer 2000 Issue of the Journal (Ring, 2000; Sabom, 2000) begs for an impartial response. In the spirit of both essays, I want to say up front that in addition to being a researcher, I am a committed evangelical Christian. And beyond having

read Michael Sabom's most recent book, *Light & Death* (Sabom, 1998), I had an enjoyable conversation with him a while back about my own upcoming book. In addition, I have read and greatly enjoyed Kenneth Ring's work.

With that said, I feel like the person who said of the Middle East conflict, "Why can't the Jews and Arabs just sit down at the bargaining table like good Christians and work out their differences?" Unfortunately, like so many discussions involving God, the differences in perspective between Ring and Sabom regarding the near-death experience (NDE) are manifold. Furthermore, they have gone well beyond a scientific examination of the phenomenon to what the phenomenon means.

Therein lies the rub. Throughout the history of modern science, the hard sciences, such as physics, chemistry, and to a lesser extent biology, have sought to steer clear of discussing the meaning behind phenomena. The reason is clear: Not only is it irrelevant to an analysis of the effect, but there is no way to quantify meaning. For example, it is not necessary for a physicist to find and explain the meaning behind Dannion Brinkley's experience with a lightning bolt in order to discuss the phenomenon of lightning and its effect on human tissue.

This approach was foundational to the success of modern science. Beginning with Galileo, we found a way to pose "scientific questions" so that the researcher could avoid any exploration of a thing's meaning. In so doing, scientists were able to answer the question: "How does one discuss something for which there is no language?" By objectively quantifying phenomena, that is, by measuring them, scientists created a standardized language that made it possible to discuss findings. To this end, scientists created innumerable scales and units, such as degrees and volts, to measure effects under investigation.

As scientists attempting to discern the nature of the NDE, we are duty-bound to find a way to measure what we find. But in the case of NDEs, the particulars make it difficult. Fortunately, science is more than just a mechanical making of measurements; it is also a way of knowing. And to further that knowing, scientists and philosophers of science developed specific philosophies to guide their approach. By the time science had fully established itself as a superior way of ascertaining a fact, positivism, empiricism, materialism, reductionism, and determinism had formed its framework. Having a rule book kept arguments to a minimum. If there were sharp disagreements (and there certainly were), scientists could always boil them down to a matter of measurement.

Furthermore, in an attempt to augment and facilitate this approach, scientists, following Isaac Newton, began to develop scientific theories. To be scientific, a theory had to do three separate things. First, it had to explain the phenomenon; that is, break it down into its constituent parts. Second, it had to describe the activity; that is, detail the mechanism behind the phenomenon and how it was integrated into its milieu. And third and most importantly, a theory must predict; that is, it must accurately predict the future state of the thing under investigation.

These were the tests to establish a successful scientific theory. Generally, scientists were somewhat flexible on the first two criteria, because those factors are subject to constant refinement. But they were unyielding when it came to the third. If a theory could not predict, it was clear that the proponent did not have the goods. All scientific postulation was rigorously subjected to direct measurement, and if the numbers did not work out, the theory was tossed onto the trash heap of history.

But after Charles Darwin, things were never the same. Regardless of what one believes about Darwin, his writings forever confused the nature of scientific theories. We still talk of Darwin's theory of evolution today, and yet we know it predicts nothing beyond the tautology that things change. Many, like the noted philosopher of science Karl Popper (1972), maintained that Darwin's concept of evolution is not a theory at all, but a paradigm unto itself. Yet the question of who is right about Darwin is immaterial here. What is germane is that it was at that point in history that the rhetorical-argument-as-theory gradually began to supplant the process theory as a tool of scientists.

This trend was intensified with the coming of Sigmund Freud and his followers, and the advent of the so-called "soft sciences," those sciences where factual information can have a qualitative as well as a quantitative aspect. The principle reason for this is that the soft sciences study human habits. Yet problematically, individual humans are like subatomic particles in a quantum matrix. They generally follow certain "laws" of human nature in the aggregate, but they seem subject to a kind of Uncertainty Principle for People when on their own.

As a result, psychological "theories" dealing with and purporting to explain individual human behavior have proliferated. Some of our best psychological "theories" work a significant percentage of the time. But the days of Newtonian-like mathematical precision across the board in science are long past. Today, it is more relevant to speak in terms of *researchers' points of view* when it comes to their study of phenomena,

particularly human phenomena. Because psychologists' beliefs are now synonymous with their theories, some might say that today we have almost as many different psychological schools of thought as we have psychologists. This highlights a significant roadblock to scientific study of the mind. In fact, for this very reason, some researchers in the hard sciences maintain that human nature cannot actually be "scientifically" studied at all.

At one time, this was the finger "hard scientists" pointed at the soft sciences so that they could maintain their air of superiority as the true minions of science. But today that is no longer possible because hard scientists are as guilty as the soft scientists of muddying the waters of what science is, thanks largely to Albert Einstein. The fall-out from Einstein's three famous theories of reality led inexorably to the falsification of determinism, empiricism, materialism, reductionism, and positivism as infallible guideposts in the acquisition of scientific knowledge.

Moreover, thanks to Kurt Gödel's Incompleteness Theorem, we now know that the ability to acquire any kind of factual knowledge about our reality is limited in principle; and we have been bouncing up against those limits for decades. The current conundrum with respect to scientific knowing always seems to bring forth a discussion of what Thomas Kuhn (1962) called a "paradigm shift." Today's paradigm shift within science is a direct result of the failure and/or limits of the above philosophies of science to permit the further acquisition of factual knowledge. This is a good thing for near-death researchers because it allows investigators to justify pushing the envelop, an act necessitated by the particulars of the case.

In the main, however, this paradigm shift has accelerated the aforementioned historical trend whereby rhetorical arguments continue to garner an ever larger share of scientific discourse. Today, almost everything in science is controversial. The further we get from direct measurement of phenomena, the more we resort to arguing. Yet arguing can be instructive; it is a time-tested, albeit annoying, method of arriving at reasonable conclusions.

At this point, therefore, it is instructive to ask: what are scientists really arguing about? The answer lies in the limits of the previous paradigm. Under the tenets of science outlined by the founding fathers of modern science, the animus for research rested on the Principle of Sufficient Reason (PSR), which said in essence that every effect must have a reason behind it.

According to Princeton philosopher of science Diogenes Allen (1989), the findings of astrophysicists and astronomers resulting from

Einstein's General Theory of Relativity led scientists to begin asking PSR questions like "Why does the universe exist?" Such questions inevitably led directly to questions of meaning and purpose. Yet scientists managed to keep such questions bottled up until a single event forced them into the mainstream of scientific discourse.

In the fall of 1973, many of the world's most renowned astronomers, astrophysicists, and mathematicians, including Stephen Hawking, Roger Penrose, Robert Wagoner, Joseph Silk, and John Wheeler, gathered in Poland to mark Nicholaus Copernicus' 500th birthday. There a presentation by Cambridge cosmologist Brandon Carter entitled "Large Number Coincidences and the Anthropic Principle in Cosmology" (Carter, 1974) brought questions of meaning squarely into the open for the first time. Today, his Anthropic Principle, which states in essence that the universe was specifically crafted to foster life on earth, remains controversial, not because its precepts are untrue, but because it forces a discussion of meaning upon scientists who have taken great pains to eschew anything metaphysical. Allowing such questions to be asked, however, proved a boon for near-death research because it is almost impossible for investigators in this field to avoid them.

Mathematical physicist Paul Davies (1999) put the problem like this: If scientists were to analyze a neon sign based strictly on the traditional philosophies of science, we would get a complete breakdown of the component parts, as well as an explanation regarding their function and overall operation. No such materialist/reductionist analysis, however, is germane to the point of a neon sign, which is to transmit information, a decidedly nonmaterial thing. The point of the sign is not to give the parts something to do; *it is to foster meaning*. As such, no analysis of the sign can be complete unless it addresses the meaning precipitated by the sign's information content.

And this brings us directly to the argument between Ring and Sabom. Even if we could measure an NDE as we measure lightning bolts, the analysis would still not be complete because this experience suggests a profound meaning beyond the mechanistic details of the event. Characteristically, the most significant series of events in our lifetime poses limitations upon scientific investigators that may be unparalleled in the annals of science. It is impossible to draw a line as to where it begins and where it ends, almost as if the *measurement problem* of quantum mechanics has a new iteration in the interface between biology, medicine, physiology, and psychology.

In my view, however, we do not need to verify thousands of separate instances of NDEs to show that they what they purport to be: in Melvin

Morse's words, "the best objective evidence of what it is like to die" (1996, p. 309). If researchers can show scientifically that *in even one instance* people leave their bodies as the body dies and proceed to another realm where they meet beings with capabilities and knowledge far beyond our own, then the phenomenon is established.

From that point on, like the neon sign, its meaning far exceeds any discussion, no matter how deep, of the parts. Unfortunately, the process of deriving and attaching meanings to the NDE is inherently fraught with argument. The nature of meaning is our oldest and perhaps most difficult argument. Yet if scientists are going to weigh in on this discussion they need hard facts. We have to save the speculation for others. For obvious reasons, however, we are stymied as investigators when it comes to gathering otherworldly facts on the NDE. And even when we finally do get to see a few of the pieces in what could conceivably be an infinitely large jigsaw puzzle, we are confronted with Winston Churchill's riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma all over again.

Therefore, interpretation is the order of the day. The qualitative assessment demands that researchers bring all that they are and all that they know to bear upon the analysis. Consequently, the conflicting views of reality offered by Ring and Sabom are a product of not only who and what they are, but what they *believe*. These are very difficult arguments to win or lose because beliefs are arrived at emotionally and therefore do not generally succumb to reason. Fortunately, in this case, it is not necessary to prove either wrong; it is entirely possible that Ring and Sabom are both correct.

Personally, I sympathize with Sabom regarding the direction of the International Association for Near-Death Studies (IANDS). I was aghast when I read an article in IANDS' newsletter, *Vital Signs*, by a woman who was trying to use her out-of-body experience to justify her homosexuality as a blessing from God (Breux, 1998). Such miscues demonstrate an inappropriate political agenda on the part of the editorial staff, and this kind of thing is increasingly becoming the norm. Moreover, for many, near-death studies appear more literary genre than scientific pursuit. As such, it is sometimes difficult to tell where hard science ends and New Age trendiness begins.

On the other hand, if God is perfect, ultimate truths cannot be dichotomous, since duplicity would be an imperfection. True facts are incontrovertible statements. Why should Christians fear truth, even if it is somewhat uncomfortable? By definition, we only seek The Way, The Truth, and The Light; yet we are notorious for bickering endlessly

amongst ourselves over every little thing. Christendom has 243 different denominations, and it is almost impossible to find a single belief they all have in common. One man's heresy is another man's dogma. This is precisely why the early church was forced to embrace creeds to solidify the mainstream of Christian thought.

As such, when Sabom referred to the notion that NDEs could be a deceptive move by the devil in a larger spiritual context, he was absolutely right: they *could* be. But at this point it is simply an unproven allegation with no basis in fact. Biblically, questions of evil and specifically *the problem of evil* are wide-ranging and remain generally unresolved. And if we invoke Occam's Razor (the Law of Parsimony), which states in essence that it is illogical in solving dilemmas to allude to factors beyond the bare minimum required to solve the problem, we can say that the NDE is explainable without allusion to the devil.

But here again is another rub. If the NDE is truly a close encounter with God or somebody like Him, we are witnessing, in my opinion, the greatest series of events since those in Palestine 2000 years ago. And with both atheists and infidels now claiming to have near-death experiences, it would seem that God's reach extends beyond the walls of Christendom.

If we merely take the best that both Ring and Sabom have to offer, we are far better off than we started. Together, their work offers clear, demonstrable, scientific evidence that the NDE is a phenomenon that ranges well beyond the bounds of brain chemistry. Sabom's Atlanta work and Ring's work with the congenitally blind were both groundbreaking to the point of causing earthquakes in science. The big question they leave us with, however, is this: Should they, in their role as research scientists, be telling us just what the NDE means?

In the old paradigm, the answer was clearly "no," but the new paradigm is a different story. Being centered on all four of Aristotle's causes, rather than just agency, the new scientific paradigm recognizes the existence of meaning and purpose. A belief exists that the emerging paradigm will eventually be distilled into a holistic way of gathering facts that encompasses all three of mankind's methods of knowing: *scientific knowing* based on systematic replication, *philosophic knowing* based on reason and logic, and *theological knowing* based on Søren Kierkegaard's sense of inward subjectivity. All three have their limitations, but together they form a powerful way of knowing a fact.

And if we look at the stages of an NDE in light of these three, some basic truths become evident. First, it is apparent that we do in fact have a soul. Second, there is life after death and we will be held accountable for

our conduct here on earth. Third, that phenomena (beings) exist beyond this realm of time and space that play an active role in our endeavors. And fourth, whether the NDE is from God (as I believe) or from Satan, we are enmeshed in a spiritual battle wherein we are implored to foster Godliness at every turn during our stay here on the planet. These are extrapolated truths from information uncovered during wide-ranging near-death studies. As such they offer a basis for common ground that all can live with to our mutual benefit.

All of this brings us full circle. Arguments will continue about the nature and scope of the NDE, as well they should. For people who seek oneness with God, they offer a profound glimpse at the meaning and purpose behind our existence. And if we can use Jesus' words to frame the context within which these arguments will transpire, I would choose these: "You shall know them by their fruits." This is a cosmic law: The fruits we manifest are indeed an indication of the reality to which we accede. So the question is, "What kinds of fruits do near-death experiencers produce?" Answering this question will give us some indication as to whether the phenomenon is a good thing or a bad thing.

This leads me to one final question: If the Jews and Arabs do sit down at the table and work out their differences like good Christians, can we all agree that in the final analysis we are all talking about the very same God? I do not know, but I am dying to find out.

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To the Editor:

I have spent as little as 10 minutes and as much as hours on issues of the Journal in the past 10 years after stepping down from being an active board member of the International Association for Near-Death Studies (IANDS) and an active near-death researcher. The Summer 2000 issue was the first that left me spellbound. How brave and honest of the Journal to publish the conflictual material between Kenneth Ring (2000) and Michael Sabom (2000)! I guess I can be considered one of Ring's colleagues and students because I was a near-death experiencer featured prominently in Ring's *Heading Toward Omega* (Ring, 1984); but how disappointing to be typecast as I was by Sabom. At the time Ring interviewed me for his book, I was not a member of IANDS, had not even seen his previous book, and did not know his "party line," nor had I read books by anyone else associated with IANDS. I was not interviewed casually at Ring's "Near-Death Hotel," but was tape-recorded on two consecutive afternoons in Ring's office at the University of Connecticut Graduate Center.

I loved reading Ring's accounts of "the good old days," having been the first active female member of the IANDS Board of Directors, from 1983 to 1990, after breaking open the "good old boy network." I worried about IANDS when I left in 1990, but seven years was enough for me and I needed to move on or burn up and burn out from the projections many of us have about what the near-death experience means to us and to the people who have them.


When I read this issue of the Journal containing Ring's and Sabom's articles, my first impression was that everything I had worried about happening to my cherished IANDS was happening. Then I realized that we all still have egos and they were at play. The editor has done a wonderful job of keeping the Journal balanced, and I am pleased that

he made room for researchers the caliber of Ring and Sabom to have their say and thankful that all this is being said because, while we get caught up in brand names, the NDE is generic. We need to remember that and bless the NDE for what it is: a direct communication from a power greater than ourselves that does not want it limited to the religions that limit us as humans.

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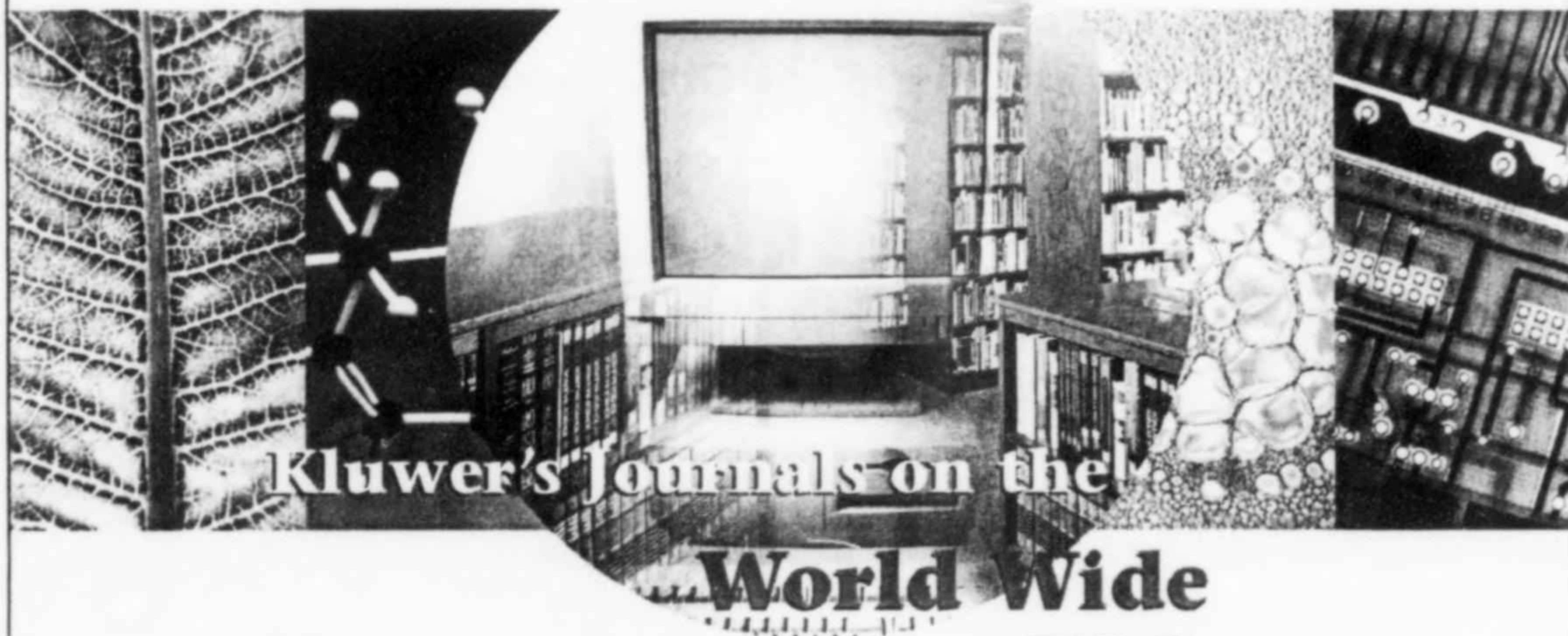
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