

THE EXPERIENCE OF DEATH AND DYING PSYCHOLOGICAL, PHILOSOPHICAL AND SPIRITUAL ASPECTS

Stanislav Grof

Received September 14 2015 • Revised September 30 2015 • Accepted October 1 2015

ABSTRACT

The article discusses some psychological, philosophical, and spiritual aspects of the research on death and dying. The author challenges materialistic understanding of death, based on metaphysical assumption inherited from the Cartesian-Newtonian paradigm that had become one of the leading myths of the Western science, according to which consciousness is an epiphenomenon of matter, a product of the physiological processes in the brain, and thus critically dependent on the body. By reviewing the existing data and observations from various fields of research he points out to the fact that there is no proof for such a reductive claim.

The research of the psychological, philosophical, and spiritual aspects of death and dying discussed in this paper offers considerable theoretical and practical implications, enabling the refusal of materialistic interpretation of death as the final end of human existence and conscious activity of any kind.

*You grieve for those that should not be grieved for.
The wise grieve neither for the living nor the dead.
Never at any time was I not.
Nor thou, nor these princes of men.
Nor will we ever cease to be hereafter.
For the unreal has no being and the real never ceases to be.*

Bhagavad Gita

Key words

Transpersonal psychology, consciousness, consciousness research, death

1 Introduction

It would be hard to imagine a subject that is more universal and more personally relevant for every single individual than death and dying. In the course of our life, we all will lose acquaintances, friends, and relatives and eventually face our own biological demise. In view of this fact, it is quite amazing that until the late 1960s, the Western industrial civilization showed an almost complete lack of interest in the subject of death and dying. This was true not only for the general population, but included also scientists and professionals involved in disciplines that should be interested in this subject, such as medicine, psychiatry, psychology, anthropology, philosophy, and theology. The only plausible explanation for this situation is massive denial of death and psychological repression of this entire area.

This disinterest is even more striking, when we compare this situation with the ancient and pre-industrial cultures and realize that their attitude to death and dying was diametrically different. Death played an extremely critical and central role in their cosmologies, philosophies, spiritual and ritual life, and mythologies, as well as everyday life. The practical importance of this difference becomes obvious when we compare the situation of a person facing death in these two historical and cultural environments.

A person dying in one of the Western industrial societies typically has a pragmatic and materialistic worldview or is at least very profoundly influenced by the exposure to it. According to mainstream academic Western science, the history of the universe is the history of developing matter. Life, consciousness, and intelligence are more or less accidental and insignificant side products of this development. They appeared on the scene after many billions of years of evolution of passive and inert matter in a trivially small part of an immense universe. In a world where only what is material, tangible, and measurable is real, there is no place for spirituality of any kind.

Although religious activities are generally permitted, or even formally encouraged, from a strictly scientific point of view any involvement in spirituality appears to be and is interpreted as an irrational activity indicating emotional and intellectual immaturity – lack of education, primitive superstition, and regression to magical and infantile thinking. Direct experiences of spiritual realities are seen as manifestations of a serious mental disease, *psychosis*. Religion, bereft of its experiential component has largely lost the connection to its deep spiritual source and as a result of it has become empty, meaningless, and increasingly irrelevant in our life. In this form, it cannot compete with the persuasiveness of materialistic science backed up by its technological triumphs.

Under these circumstances, religion has ceased to be a vital force during our life, as well as at the time of dying and death. Its references to life after death, the posthumous adventures of the soul, and the abodes of

the Beyond, such as heaven and hell, have been relegated to the realm of fairy tales and handbooks of psychiatry. The entire spiritual history of humanity has been pathologized. At the cradle of all the great religions of the world were transpersonal experiences of their founders, prophets, and saints. We can think here, for example, about Buddha's encounter with Kama Mara and his army or his reliving of various episodes from his past incarnations accompanied by "tearing of the karmic bonds". The *Old Testament* describes Moses' vision of Jehova in the burning bush and the *New Testament* Jesus' temptation by the devil during his stay in the desert. Islamic scriptures portray the journey of Muhammad through the seven heavens, paradise, and hell in the company of archangel Gabriel. According to traditional psychiatry, all these experiences are indicative of severe psychopathology, mental disease of the individuals involved.

Psychiatric literature abounds in articles and books discussing what would be the best clinical diagnosis for various famous spiritual figures, some of them of the stature of the Buddha, Jesus, Muhammad, Ramakrishna, or Saint Anthony. Visionary experiences of the transpersonal realms are usually attributed to severe psychosis of the schizophrenic type or to epilepsy, as it is in the case of Muhammad. Saint John of the Cross has been labeled "hereditary degenerate" and Saint Teresa of Avila a "hysterical psychotic". Mainstream anthropologists have argued whether shamans are psychotics, hysterics, or epileptics. There is even a paper applying psychopathological criteria to meditation. It is entitled "Buddhist Training as Artificial Catatonia", and its author

is the famous psychoanalyst and founder of psychosomatic medicine Franz Alexander (Alexander 1931).

According to Western neuroscience, consciousness is an epiphenomenon of matter, a product of the physiological processes in the brain, and thus critically dependent on the body. The death of the body, particularly of the brain, is then seen as the absolute end of any form of conscious activity. Belief in the posthumous journey of the soul, afterlife, or reincarnation is usually ridiculed as a product of wishful thinking of people who are unable to accept the obvious biological imperative of death, the absolute nature of which has been scientifically proven beyond any reasonable doubt. Very few people, including most scientists, realize that we have absolutely no proof that consciousness is actually produced by the brain and not even a remote notion how something like that could possibly happen. In spite of it, this basic metaphysical assumption remains one of the leading myths of Western materialistic science and has profound influence on our entire society.

This attitude has effectively inhibited scientific interest in the experiences of dying patients and of individuals in near-death situations until the 1970s. The rare reports on this subject received very little attention, whether they came in the form of books for general public, such as Jess E. Weisse's *The Vestibule* (Weisse 1972) and Jean-Baptiste Delacour's *Glimpses of the Beyond* (Delacour 1974), or scientific research, such as the study of death-bed observations of physicians and nurses conducted by Karlis Osis (Osis 1961). Since the publication of Raymond Moody's internation-

al bestseller *Life After Life* in 1975, Elizabeth Kübler-Ross, Ken Ring, Michael Sabom, and other pioneers of thanatology have amassed impressive evidence about the amazing characteristics of near-death experiences from accurate extrasensory perception during out-of-body experiences to profound personality changes following them.

The material from these studies has been widely publicized and used by the media from TV talk shows to Hollywood movies. Yet, these potentially paradigm-shattering observations that could revolutionize our understanding of the nature of consciousness and its relationship to the brain are still dismissed by most professionals as irrelevant hallucinations produced by a biological crisis. They are also not routinely recorded and examined as an important part of the patients' medical history and no specific psychological support is being offered in most of the medical facilities that would help to integrate these challenging events.

People dying in Western societies also often lack effective human support that would ease their transition. We try to protect ourselves from the emotional discomfort that death induces. The industrial world tends to remove sick and dying people into hospitals and nursing homes. The emphasis is on life-support systems and mechanical prolongation of life, often beyond any reasonable limits, rather than the quality of the human environment. The family system has disintegrated and children often live far from the parents and grandparents. At the time of medical crisis, the contact is often formal and minimal. In addition, mental health professionals, who

have developed specific forms of psychological support and counseling for a large variety of emotional crises, have given close to no attention to the dying. Those facing the most profound of all imaginable crises, one that affects simultaneously the biological, emotional, interpersonal, social, philosophical, and spiritual aspects of the individual remain the only ones for whom meaningful help is not available.

All this occurs in the much larger context of collective denial of impermanence and mortality that characterizes Western industrial civilization. Much of our encounter with death comes in a sanitized form, where a team of professionals mitigates its immediate impact. In its extreme expression, it includes post-mortem barbers and hairdressers, tailors, make-up experts, and plastic surgeons who make a wide variety of cosmetic adjustments on the corpse before it is shown to relatives and friends. The media help create more distance from death by diluting it into empty statistics reporting in a matter of fact way about the thousands of victims who died in wars, revolutions, and natural catastrophes. Movies and TV shows further trivialize death by capitalizing on violence. They immunize modern audiences against its emotional relevance by exposing them to countless scenes of dying, killing, and murder in the context of entertainment.

In general, the conditions of life existing in modern technologized countries do not offer much ideological or psychological support for people who are facing death. This contrasts very sharply with the situation encountered by those dying in one of the ancient and pre-

industrial societies. Their cosmologies, philosophies, mythologies, as well as spiritual and ritual life, contain a clear message that death is not the absolute and irrevocable end of everything, that life or existence continues in some form after the biological demise. Eschatological mythologies are in general agreement that the soul of the deceased undergoes a complex series of adventures in consciousness. The posthumous journey of the soul is sometimes described as a travel through fantastic landscapes that bear some similarity to those on earth, other times as encounters with various archetypal beings, or as moving through a sequence of *non-ordinary states of consciousness* (later NOSC). In some cultures the soul reaches a temporary realm in the Beyond, such as the Christian *purgatory* or the *lokas* of Tibetan Buddhism, in others an eternal abode – heaven, hell, paradise, or the sun realm.

Pre-industrial societies thus seemed to agree that death was not the ultimate defeat and end of everything, but an important transition. The experiences associated with death were seen as visits to important dimensions of reality that deserved to be experienced, studied, and carefully mapped. The dying were familiar with the eschatological cartographies of their cultures, whether these were shamanic maps of the funeral landscapes or sophisticated descriptions of the Eastern spiritual systems, such as those found in the Tibetan *Bardo Thödol*. This important text of Tibetan Buddhism represents an interesting counterpoint to the exclusive pragmatic emphasis on productive life and denial of death characterizing the Western civilization. It describes the time of death as a unique

opportunity for spiritual liberation from the cycles of death and rebirth and a period that determines our next incarnation, if we do not achieve liberation. In this context, it is possible to see the intermediate state between lives (*bardo*) as being in a way more important than incarnate existence. It is then essential to prepare for this time by systematic practice during our lifetime.

Another characteristic aspect of ancient and pre-industrial cultures that colors the experience of dying is their acceptance of death as an integral part of life. Throughout their life, people living in these cultures get used to spending time around dying people, handling corpses, observing cremation, and living with their remnants. For a Westerner, a visit to a place like Benares where this attitude is expressed in its extreme form can be a profoundly shattering experience. In addition, dying people in pre-industrial cultures typically die in the context of an extended family, clan, or tribe. They thus can receive meaningful emotional support from people whom they intimately know. It is also important to mention powerful rituals conducted at the time of death designed to assist individuals facing the ultimate transition, or even specific guidance of the dying, such as the approach described in the *Bardo Thödol*.

An extremely important factor influencing the attitude toward death and the experience of dying has been the existence of various forms of experiential training for dying involving NOSC. The oldest among them is the practice of shamanism, the most ancient religion and healing art of humanity, the roots of which reach far back into the Pa-

leolithic era. Among the beautiful images of primeval animals painted and carved on the walls of the great caves in Southern France and Northern Spain, such as Lascaux, Font de Gaume, Les Trois Frères, Altamira, and others, are figures that undoubtedly represent ancient shamans. In some of the caves, the discoverers also found footprints in circular arrangements suggesting that their inhabitants conducted dances, similar to those still performed by some aboriginal cultures for the induction of NOSC. Shamanism is not only ancient, but also universal; it can be found in North and South America, in Europe, Africa, Asia, Australia, and Polynesia.

Shamanism is intimately connected with NOSC, as well as with death and dying. The career of many shamans begins with the "shamanic illness", a spontaneous initiatory crisis conducive to profound healing and psychospiritual transformation. It is a visionary journey involving the visit to the underworld, painful and frightening ordeals, and an experience of psychological death and rebirth followed by ascent into supernal realms. In this experience, the novice shaman connects to the forces of nature and to the animal realm and learns how to diagnose and heal diseases. The knowledge of the realm of death acquired during this transformation makes it possible for the shaman to move freely back and forth and mediate these journeys for other people.

The anthropologists have also described rites of passage, elaborate rituals conducted by various aboriginal cultures at the time of important biological and social transitions, such as birth, circumcision, puberty, mar-

riage, dying, and others. They employ powerful mind-altering technologies and the experiences induced by them revolve around the trias birth-sex-death. Their symbolism involves different combinations of perinatal and transpersonal elements. Clinical work with psychedelics and various non-drug experiential approaches (such as the *Holotropic Breathwork*) has helped us understand these events and appreciate their importance for individuals and human groups.

Closely related to the rites of passage were the ancient mysteries of death and rebirth, complex sacred and secret procedures that were also using powerful mind-altering techniques. They were particularly prevalent in the Mediterranean area, as exemplified by the Babylonian ceremonies of Inanna and Tammuz, the Egyptian mysteries of Isis and Osiris, the Orphic Cult, the Bacchanalia, the Eleusinian mysteries, the Corybantic rites, and the mysteries of Attis and Adonis. The mysteries were based on mythological stories of deities that symbolize death and rebirth. The most famous of them were the Eleusinian mysteries that were conducted near Athens every five years without interruption for a period of almost 2 000 years. According to a modern study by Wasson, Hofmann, and Ruck, the ritual potion ("*kykeon*") used in these mysteries contained ergot preparations related closely to LSD (Wasson, Hofmann, and Ruck 1978).

The sacred literature of the various mystical traditions and the great spiritual philosophies of the East is of particular interest for transpersonally oriented researchers. Here belong the various systems of yoga, the the-

ory and practice of Buddhism, Taoism, the Tibetan Vajrayana, Sufism, Christian mysticism, the Kabbalah, and many others. These systems developed effective forms of prayers, meditations, movement meditations, breathing exercises, and other powerful techniques for inducing NOSC with profoundly spiritual components. Like the experiences of the shamans, initiates in the rites of passage, and neophytes in ancient mysteries, these procedures offered the possibility of confronting one's impermanence and mortality, transcending the fear of death, and radically transforming one's being in the world.

The description of the resources available to dying people in pre-industrial cultures would not be complete without mentioning the books of the dead, such as the Tibetan *Bardo Thödol*, the Egyptian *Pert Em Hru*, the Aztec *Codex Borgia*, or the European *Ars Moriendi*. When the ancient books of the dead first came to the attention of Western scholars, they were considered to be fictitious descriptions of the posthumous journey of the soul, and as such wishful fabrications of people who were unable to accept the grim reality of death. They were put in the same category as fairy tales – imaginary creations of human fantasy that had definite artistic beauty, but no relevance for everyday reality.

However, a deeper study of these texts revealed that they had been used as guides in the context of sacred mysteries and of spiritual practice and very likely described the experiences of the initiates and practitioners. From this new perspective, presenting the books of the dead as manuals for the dying appeared to be simply a clever disguise

invented by the priests to obscure their real function and protect their deeper esoteric meaning and message from the uninitiated. However, the remaining problem was to discover the exact nature of the procedures used by the ancient spiritual systems to induce these states.

Modern research focusing on NOSC brought unexpected new insights into this problem area. Systematic study of the experiences in psychedelic sessions, powerful non-drug forms of psychotherapy, and spontaneously occurring psychospiritual crises showed that in all these situations, people can encounter an entire spectrum of unusual experiences, including sequences of agony and dying, passing through hell, facing divine judgment, being reborn, reaching the celestial realms, and confronting memories from previous incarnations. These states were strikingly similar to those described in the eschatological texts of ancient and pre-industrial cultures.

Another missing piece of the puzzle was provided by thanatology, the new scientific discipline specifically studying death and dying. Thanatological studies of near-death states by people like Raymond Moody (*Life After Life*, Moody 1975), Kenneth Ring (*Life at Death and Heading Toward Omega*, Ring 1982, 1985), Michael Sabom (*Recollections of Death*, Sabom 1982), Bruce Greyson and Charles Flynn (*The Near Death Experience*, Greyson and Flynn 1984) showed that the experiences associated with life-threatening situations bear a deep resemblance to the descriptions from the ancient books of the dead as well as those reported by subjects in psychedelic sessions and modern experiential psychotherapy.

It has thus become clear that the ancient eschatological texts are actually maps of the inner territories of the psyche encountered in profound NOSC, including those associated with biological dying. The experiences involved seem to transcend race and culture, and originate in the collective unconscious, as described by C. G. Jung. It is possible to spend one's entire lifetime without ever experiencing these realms or even without being aware of their existence, until one is catapulted into them at the time of biological death. However, for some people this experiential area becomes available during their lifetime in a variety of situations including psychedelic sessions or some other powerful forms of self-exploration, serious spiritual practice, participation in shamanic rituals, or during spontaneous psycho-spiritual crises. This opens up for them the possibility of experiential exploration of these territories of the psyche on their own terms so that the encounter with death does not come as a complete surprise when it is imposed on them at the time of biological demise.

The Austrian Augustinian monk Abraham a Sancta Clara who lived in the seventeenth century, expressed in a succinct way the importance of the experiential practice of dying: "The man who dies before he dies does not die when he dies." This "dying before dying" has two important consequences: it liberates the individual from the fear of death and changes his or her attitude toward it, as well as influences the actual experience of dying at the time of the biological demise. However, this elimination of the fear of death, also transforms the individual's way of being in the world. For this reason, there is no funda-

mental difference between the preparation for death and the practice of dying, on the one hand, and spiritual practice leading to enlightenment, on the other. This is the reason why the ancient books of the dead could be used in both situations.

As we have seen, many aspects of life in pre-industrial cultures made the psychological situation of dying people significantly easier in comparison with the Western technological civilization. Naturally, the question that immediately arises is whether this advantage was to a great extent due to lack of reliable information about the nature of reality and to wishful self-deception. If that were the case, a significant part of our difficulties in facing death would simply be the toll we have to pay for our deeper knowledge of the universal scheme of things and we might prefer to bear the consequences of knowing the truth. However, closer examination of the existing evidence clearly shows that this is not the case.

The single most important factor responsible for the most fundamental differences between the worldview of Western industrial cultures and all other human groups throughout history is not the superiority of materialistic science over primitive superstition, but our profound ignorance in regard to NOSC. The only way the Cartesian-Newtonian worldview of Western science can be maintained is by systematic suppression or misinterpretation of all the evidence generated by consciousness studies, whether its source is history, anthropology, comparative religion, or various areas of modern research, such as parapsychology, thanatology, psychedelic therapy, biofeedback, sensory deprivation,

experiential psychotherapies, or the work with individuals in psychospiritual crises (“spiritual emergencies”).

Systematic practice of various forms of NOSC that characterizes the ritual and spiritual life of ancient and aboriginal cultures inevitably leads to an understanding of the nature of reality and of the relationship between consciousness and matter that is fundamentally different from the belief system of technologized societies. I have yet to meet a single Western academician who has done extensive inner work involving NOSC and continues to subscribe to the current scientific understanding of consciousness, psyche, human nature, and the nature of reality taught in Western universities. This is entirely independent of the educational background, IQ, and specific area of expertise of the individuals involved. The difference in regard to the possibility of consciousness after death thus exactly reflects the differences in the attitude toward NOSC.

Ancient and pre-industrial cultures held NOSC in high esteem, practiced them regularly in socially sanctioned contexts, and spent much time and energy developing safe and effective techniques of inducing them. These experiences were the main vehicle for their ritual and spiritual life as a means of direct communication with archetypal domains of deities and demons, forces of nature, the animal realms, and the cosmos. Additional uses of NOSC involved diagnosing and healing diseases, cultivating intuition and ESP, and obtaining artistic inspiration, as well as practical purposes, such as locating game and finding lost objects and people. Accord-

ing to anthropologist Victor Turner, sharing in groups also contributes to tribal bonding and tends to create a sense of deep connectedness (*communitas*).

Western society pathologized all forms of NOSC (with the exception of dreams that are not recurrent, or nightmares), spends much time trying to develop effective ways of suppressing them when they occur spontaneously, and tends to outlaw tools and contexts associated with them. Western psychiatry makes no distinction between a mystical experience and a psychotic experience and sees both as manifestations of mental disease. In its rejection of religion, it does not differentiate between primitive folk beliefs or the fundamentalists’ literal interpretations of scriptures and sophisticated mystical traditions and Eastern spiritual philosophies based on centuries of systematic introspective exploration of the psyche. This approach has pathologized the entire spiritual history of humanity.

Let us now briefly review the observations from various fields of research that challenge the materialistic understanding, according to which biological death represents the final end of existence and of conscious activity of any kind. In any exploration of this kind, it is important to keep an open mind and focus as much as possible only on the facts of observation. An unshakeable a priori commitment to the existing paradigm that characterizes the approach of mainstream science to this area is an attitude that is well known from fundamentalist religions. Unlike scientism of this kind, science in the true sense of the word is open to unbiased investigation of any exist-

ing phenomena. With this in mind, we can divide the existing evidence into two categories: (1) experiences and observations that challenge the traditional understanding of the nature of consciousness and its relationship to matter; (2) experiences and observations specifically related to the understanding of death and survival of consciousness.

2 Experiences and observations challenging the traditional understanding of consciousness and its relationship to matter

The work with NOSC has generated a vast body of evidence that represents a serious challenge for the Cartesian-Newtonian paradigm of materialistic science. Most of the challenging data are related to transpersonal phenomena that represent an important part of the spectrum of experiences observed in NOSC. They suggest an urgent need for a radical revision of our current concepts of the nature of consciousness and its relationship to matter and the brain. Since the materialistic paradigm of Western science has been a major obstacle for any objective evaluation of the data describing the events occurring at the time of death, the study of transpersonal experiences has an indirect relevance for thanatology.

In transpersonal experiences, it is possible to transcend the usual limitations of the body, ego, space, and linear time. The disappearance of spatial boundaries can lead to authentic and convincing identifications with other people, animals of different species,

plant life, and even inorganic materials and processes. One can also transcend the temporal boundaries and experience episodes from the lives of one's human and animal ancestors, as well as collective, racial, and karmic memories. In addition, transpersonal experiences can take us into the archetypal domains of the collective unconscious and mediate encounter with blissful and wrathful deities of various cultures and visits to mythological realms. In all these types of experiences, it is possible to access entirely new information that by far surpasses anything that we obtained earlier through the conventional channels. The study of consciousness that can extend beyond the body, William Roll's "*theta consciousness*" or the "*long body*" of the Iroquois, is extremely important for the issue of survival, since it is this part of human personality that would be likely to survive death.

According to materialistic science, any memory requires a material substrate, such as the neuronal network in the brain or the DNA molecules of the genes. However, it is impossible to imagine any material medium for the information conveyed by various forms of transpersonal experiences described above. This information clearly has not been acquired during the individual's lifetime through the conventional means that is by sensory perception. It seems to exist independently of matter and be contained in the field of consciousness itself, or in some other types of fields that cannot be detected by our scientific instruments. The observations from the study of transpersonal experiences are supported by evidence that comes from other avenues of research. Challeng-

ing the basic metaphysical assumptions of Cartesian-Newtonian thinking, scientists like Heinz von Foerster (von Foerster 1965), Rupert Sheldrake (Sheldrake 1981), and Ervin Laszlo (1994) seriously explore such possibilities as “*memory without a material substrate*”, “*morphogenetic fields*”, and the record of all events from the history of the universe in the subquantum “*psi-field*”.

Traditional academic science describes human beings as highly developed animals and biological thinking machines. Experienced and studied in the everyday state of consciousness, we appear to be Newtonian objects made of atoms, molecules, cells, tissues, and organs. However, transpersonal experiences in clearly show that each of us can also manifest the properties of a field of consciousness that transcends space, time, and linear causality. The complete new formula, remotely reminiscent of the *wave-particle paradox* in modern physics, thus describes humans as paradoxical beings who have two complementary aspects: they can show properties of Newtonian objects and also those of infinite fields of consciousness. The appropriateness of each of these descriptions depends on the state of consciousness in which these observations are made. Physical death then seems to terminate one half of this definition, while the other comes into full expression.

3 Experiences and observations specifically related to the understanding of death and survival of consciousness

3.1 Phenomena on the threshold of death

Researchers have reported a variety of interesting phenomena occurring at the time of death. Here belong, for example numerous visions of people who just had died that are reported by their relatives, friends, and acquaintances. It has been found that such visions show statistically significant correlation with distantly occurring deaths of the appearing persons within a twelve-hour period (Sidgwick 1889). There also exist reports of unexplained physical events occurring at the time of death, such as watches stopping and starting, bells ringing, paintings or photographs falling of the wall, and others, that seem to announce a person’s death (Bozzano 1948). Individuals approaching death often experience encounters with their dead relatives who seem to welcome them to the next world. These deathbed visions are very authentic and convincing; they are often followed by a state of euphoria and seem to ease the transition. A number of cases have been reported, in which a dying individual has a vision of a person about whose death he or she did not know; these have been referred to as “*peak in Darien*” cases.

Of particular interest are *near-death experiences* (NDEs) that occur in about one-third of the people who encounter various forms of life-threatening situations, such as car

accidents, near-drowning, heart attacks, or cardiac arrests during operations. Raymond Moody, Kenneth Ring, Michael Sabom, Bruce Greyson, and others have done extensive research of this phenomenon and have described a characteristic experiential pattern that typically includes a life-review, passage through a dark tunnel, personal judgment with ethical evaluation of one's life, encounter with a radiant divine being, and visit to various transcendental realms. Less frequent are painful, anxiety-provoking, and infernal types of NDEs.

In our program of psychedelic therapy with terminal cancer patients, conducted at the Maryland Psychiatric Research Center in Baltimore, we were able to obtain some evidence about the similarity of NDEs with experiences induced by psychedelic substances. We observed several patients who had first psychedelic experiences and later an actual NDE when their disease progressed (e.g. a cardiac arrest during an operation). They reported that these situations were very similar and described the psychedelic sessions as an invaluable experiential training for dying (Grof 1976).

The most extraordinary and fascinating aspect of NDEs is the occurrence of "veridical" *out-of-body experiences* (OOBEs), a term used for experiences of disembodied consciousness with accurate extrasensory perception. Thanatological studies have repeatedly confirmed that people who are unconscious or even clinically dead can have OOBEs during which they observe their bodies and the rescue procedures from above, or perceive events in remote locations. Current thanato-

logical research now focuses on confirmation of some preliminary observations of these experiences occurring in congenitally blind persons. Classical descriptions of OOBEs can be found in spiritual literature and philosophical texts of all ages. Modern thanatological research thus confirms the descriptions in the Tibetan *Book of the Dead (Bardo Thödol)*, according to which an individual after death assumes a "*bardo body*" which transcends the limitations of time and space and can freely travel around the earth.

Veridical OOBEs do not occur only in the context of near-death situations, vital emergencies, and episodes of clinical death. They can emerge in the sessions of powerful experiential psychotherapy (such as primal therapy, rebirthing, or *Holotropic Breathwork*), in the context of experiences induced by psychedelics (particularly the dissociative anesthetic ketamine), and also spontaneously. Such events can represent isolated episodes in the life of the individual, or occur repeatedly as part of a crisis of psychic opening or some other type of spiritual emergency. The authenticity of OOBEs has also been demonstrated in controlled clinical studies, such as the experiments of the well-known psychologist and parapsychologist Charles Tart with Ms. Z. at the University of California in Davis (Tart 1968) and perceptual tests conducted by Karlis Osis and D. McCormick with Alex Tanous (Osis and McCormick 1980).

OOBEs with confirmed ESP of the environment are of special importance for the problem of consciousness after death, since they demonstrate the possibility of consciousness operating independently of the body. Ac-

According to the Western materialistic worldview, consciousness is a product of the neurophysiological processes in the brain and it is absurd to think that consciousness could detach itself from the body and maintain its sensory capacity. Yet this is precisely what occurs in many well-documented cases of OOBs. Naturally, people who have had OOBs might have come close to death, but did not really die. However, it seems reasonable to infer that if consciousness can function independently of the body during one's lifetime, it could be able to do the same after death.

3.2 Past life experiences

There exists a category of transpersonal experiences that has very direct relevance for the problem of survival of consciousness after death. It involves reliving or remembering vivid episodes from other historical periods and various parts of the world. The historical and geographical universality of these experiences suggests that they represent a very important cultural phenomenon. They also have critical implications for understanding the nature of consciousness, psyche, and human beings and for the theory and practice of psychiatry, psychology, and psychotherapy.

For the Hindus, Buddhists, and also for open-minded and knowledgeable consciousness researchers, reincarnation is not a matter of belief, but an empirical issue, based on a variety of experiences and observations. According to Christopher Bache, the evidence in this area is so rich and extraordinary that scientists who do not think the problem of reincarnation deserves serious study are "*either uninformed or thickheaded*" (Bache 1988).

The nature of the existing evidence that one should be familiar with before making any judgments concerning reincarnation is described in a mythological language in a passage written by Sholem Asch, a twentieth century Hasidic scholar: "Not the power to remember, but its very opposite, the power to forget, is a necessary condition of our existence. If the lore of the transmigration of souls is a true one, then these souls, between their exchanges of bodies, must pass through the sea of forgetfulness. According to the Jewish view, we make the transition under the overlordship of the Angel of Forgetfulness. But it sometimes happens that the Angel of Forgetfulness himself forgets to remove from our memories the records of the former world; and then our senses are haunted by fragmentary recollections of another life. They drift like torn clouds above the hills and valleys of the mind, and weave themselves into the incidents of our current existence."

Naturally, we need more than a poetic reference to ancient mythology. Careful study of the amassed evidence is absolutely necessary to make any valid conclusions in this area. As we will discuss later, this matter is of great importance, since the beliefs concerning the issue of reincarnation have great ethical impact on human life and possible relevance for the situation in the world and its future.

3.2.1 Spontaneous past life memories in children

There exist many instances of small children who seem to be remembering and describing their previous life in another body, another

place, and with other people. These memories emerge usually spontaneously shortly after these children begin to talk. They often present various complications in the life of these children and can be even associated with “carry-over pathologies”, such as phobias, strange reactions to certain people, or various idiosyncrasies. Child psychiatrists have described cases like this. Access to these memories usually disappears between the ages of five and eight.

Ian Stevenson, professor of psychology at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, VA, has conducted meticulous studies of over three thousand of such cases and reported them in his books *Twenty Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation*, *Unlearned Languages*, and *Children Who Remember Previous Lives* (Stevenson 1966, 1984, and 1987), reporting only several hundred of them, because many have not met the highest standard. Some of them were eliminated because the family benefited financially, in terms of social prestige, or public attention, others because Stevenson found a connecting person who could have been the psychic link. Additional reasons were inconsistent testimony, cryptomnesia, witnesses of questionable character, or indication of fraud. Only the strongest cases were included.

The findings of Stevenson’s research were quite remarkable. He was able to confirm by independent investigation the stories the children were telling about their previous lives, often with incredible details, although he had eliminated in all the reported cases the possibility that they could have obtained the information through the conventional channels. In

some cases, he actually took the children into the village that they remembered from their previous life. Although they had never been there in their current lifetime, they were familiar with the topography of the village, were able to find the home they had allegedly lived in, recognized the members of their “family” and the villagers, and knew their names. To illustrate the nature of Stevenson’s material, I will present here a condensed version of the story of Parmod Sharma, one of the twenty subjects described in his early publication.

Parmod Sharma was born on October 11, 1944, in Bisauli, India. His father was Professor Bankey-behary Lal Sharma, a Sanskrit scholar at a nearby college. When Parmod was about two and a half, he began telling his mother not to cook meals for him any more, because he had a wife in Moradabad who could cook. Moradabad was a town about a ninety miles northeast of Bisauli. Between the ages of three and four, he began to speak in detail of his life there. He described several businesses he had owned and operated with other members of his family. He particularly spoke of a shop that manufactured and sold biscuits and soda water, calling it “Mohan Brothers”. He insisted that he was one of the Mohan brothers and that he also had a business in Saharanpur, a town about a hundred miles north of Moradabad.

Parmod tended not to play with the other children in Bisauli but preferred to play by himself, building models of shops complete with electrical wiring. He especially liked to make mud biscuits, which he served his family with tea or soda water. During this time, he provided many details about his shop, including its size and location in Moradabad, what was sold there, and his activities connected to it, such as his business trips to Delhi. He even

complained to his parents about the less prosperous financial situation of their home compared to what he was used to as a successful merchant.

[*Parmod's uncle had been temporarily stationed as a railroad employee in Moradabad when Parmod was very young. Because of Parmod's interest in biscuits, his uncle had brought him biscuits from the "Mohan Brothers" shop. The biscuits had the shop's name embossed on them, and although Parmod could not yet read, the biscuits might have stimulated associations for him. Interestingly enough, Parmod's mother says that Parmod did not recognize the biscuits. His uncle had not been in Moradabad when Parmanand was alive, nor did he have any personal acquaintance with any of the Mehra brothers. He was not familiar with the family's business affairs.]

Parmod had a strong distaste for curd, which is quite unusual for an Indian child, and on one occasion even advised his father against eating it, saying that it was dangerous. Parmod said that in his other life he had become seriously ill after eating too much curd one day. He had an equally strong dislike for being submerged in water, which might relate to his report that he had previously "died in a bathtub". Parmod said that he had been married and had five children – four sons and one daughter. He was anxious to see his family again and frequently begged his parents to take him back to Moradabad to visit them. His family always refused the request, though his mother did get him to begin school by promising to take him to Moradabad when he had learned to read.

Parmod's parents never investigated or tried to verify their son's claims, perhaps because of the Indian belief that children who remembered their previous lives died early. News of Parmod's statements, however, eventually reached the ears of

a family in Moradabad named Mehra, which fit many of the details of his story. The brothers of this family owned several businesses in Moradabad including a biscuit and soda shop named "Mohan Brothers". The shop had been named after the eldest brother, Mohan Mehra, and had originally been called "Mohan and Brothers". This was later shortened to "Mohan Brothers". This shop had been started and managed by Parmanand Mehra until his untimely death on May 9, 1943, eighteen months before Parmod was born.

Parmanand had gorged himself on curd, one of his favorite foods, at a wedding feast, and had subsequently developed a chronic gastrointestinal illness followed later by appendicitis and peritonitis from which he died. Two or three days before his death, he had insisted, against his family's advice, on eating more curd, saying that he might not have another chance to enjoy it. Parmanand had blamed his illness and impending death on overeating curd. As part of his therapy during his appendicitis, Parmanand had tried a series of naturopathies bath treatments. While he had not in fact died in a bathtub, he had been given a bath immediately prior to his death. Parmanand left a widow and five children – four sons and one daughter.

In the summer of 1949, the Mehra family decided to make the trip to Bisauli to meet Parmod, who was a little under five years old at the time. When they arrived, however, Parmod was away and no contact was made. Not long thereafter, Parmod's father took him to Moradabad to explore his son's compelling remembrances first hand. Among those who met Parmod at the railway station was Parmanand's cousin, Sri Karam Chand Mehra, who had been quite close to Parmanand. Parmod threw his arm around him weeping, calling

him “older brother” and saying “I am Parmanand”. Parmod had not used the name Parmanand before this meeting. It is for Indians common to call a cousin “brother” if the relationship is a close one, as was the case for Parmanand and Karam. The intensity and genuineness of the emotions this reunion generated seemed in itself to be as important a piece of evidence as verification and information about external objects and events.

Parmod then proceeded to find his way to the “Mohan Brothers” shop on his own, giving instructions to the driver of the carriage, which brought them from the station. Entering the shop, he complained that “his” special seat had been changed. In India it is customary for the owner of a business to have an enclosed seat – a *gaddi* – located near the front of the store where he can greet customers and direct business. The location of Parmanand’s *gaddi* had in fact been changed some time after his death. Once inside, Parmod asked: “Who is looking after the bakery and soda water factory?” This had been Parmanand’s responsibility. The complicated machine, which manufactured the soda water, had been secretly disabled in order to test Parmod. However, when it was shown to him, Parmod knew exactly how it worked. Without any assistance, he located the disconnected hose and gave instructions for its repair.

Later at Parmanand’s home, Parmod recognized the room where Parmanand had slept and commented on a room screen that he correctly observed had not been there in Parmanand’s day. He also identified a particular cupboard that Parmanand had kept his things in, as well as a special low table, which had also been his. “This is the one I used to use for my meals,” he said. When Parmanand’s mother entered the room, he immediately recognized her as “Mother” before

anyone else present was able to say anything. He also correctly identified Parmanand’s wife, acting somewhat embarrassed in front of her. She was, after all, a full-grown woman and he was only five, though apparently possessing at least some of the feelings of an adult husband. When they were alone, he said to her: “I have come, but you have not fixed *bindi*,” referring to the red dot worn on the forehead by Hindu wives. He also reproached her for wearing a white *sari*, the appropriate dress for a Hindu widow, instead of the colored *sari* worn by wives.

Parmod correctly recognized Parmanand’s daughter and the one son who was at the house when he had arrived. When Parmanand’s youngest son who had been at school showed up later, Parmod correctly identified him as well, using his familiar name, Gordhan. In their conversation, Parmod would not allow the older Gordhan to address him by his first name, but insisted that he call him “Father”. “I have only become small,” he said. During this visit, Parmod also correctly identified one of Parmanand’s brothers and a nephew.

Parmod showed a striking knowledge for the details of Parmanand’s world. While touring the hotel the Mehra brothers owned in Moradabad, the Victory Hotel, Parmod commented on the new sheds that had been built on the property. The Mehra family confirmed that these had indeed been added after Parmanand’s death. Entering the hotel, Parmod pointed out to some cupboard and said: “These are the *almirahs* I had constructed in Churchill House.” Churchill House was the name of a second hotel the Mehra brothers owned in Saharanpur, a town about a hundred miles north of Moradabad. Shortly after Parmanand’s death, the family had in fact decided to move these particular cupboards, which Parmanand had built for

Churchill House, to the Victory Hotel.

On a visit to Saharanpur later that fall, Parmod spontaneously identified a doctor known to Parmanand in that city. "He is a doctor and an old friend of mine," he said. During that visit, he also recognized a man named Yasmin who, as he insisted, owned him (Parmanand) some money. "I have got some money back from you," he said. At first, Yasmin was reluctant to acknowledge the loan, but after being reassured that the Mehra family was not going to press for repayment, he admitted that Parmod was quite right about the debt.

The reason why the children remember their previous life might be the circumstances of death, particularly those involving shock that "can possibly break through the amnesia"; the most vivid memories involve events leading up to it. Typically, these children do not know anything about events that occurred in the former personality's life after his or her death. This is an important point in deciding whether they are unconsciously reconstructing the details of this life by telepathically reading the minds of those who knew the deceased or possess these details as genuine memories. Possibly the strongest evidence in support of the reincarnation hypothesis is the incidence of striking birthmarks that reflect injuries and other events from the remembered life.

In evaluating this evidence, it is important to emphasize that Stevenson's cases were not only from "primitive", "exotic" cultures with a priori belief in reincarnation, but also from Western countries, including Great Britain and USA. His research meets high standards and has received considerable esteem. In the

year 1977, the *Journal of Nervous and Mental Diseases* devoted almost an entire issue to this subject and the work was reviewed in the *JAMA*.

3.2.2 Spontaneous past life memories in adults

Spontaneous vivid reliving of past life memories occurs most frequently during spontaneous episodes of NOSC (spiritual emergencies); however, various degrees of remembering can also happen in more or less ordinary states of consciousness in the circumstances of everyday life. Academic psychiatry and current theories of personality are based on the "one-timer view". Traditional professionals are aware of the existence of past life experiences, but treat them indiscriminately as indications of serious psychopathology.

3.2.3 Evoked past life memories in adults

Past life experiences can be elicited by a wide variety of techniques that mediate access to deep levels of the psyche, such as meditation, hypnosis, psychedelic substances, sensory isolation, bodywork, and various powerful experiential psychotherapies (primal therapy, rebirthing, or *Holotropic Breathwork*). They often appear unsolicited in sessions with therapists who do not aim for them and do not even believe in them, catching them completely off-guard. Their emergence is also completely independent of the subject's previous philosophical and religious belief system. In addition, past life experiences occur on the same continuum with accurate memories from adolescence, childhood, infancy, birth, and prenatal memories that can

be regularly reliably verified. Sometimes they coexist or alternate with them (Grof 1988, 1992).

There are important reasons to assume that past life experiences are authentic phenomena sui generis that have important implications for psychology and psychotherapy because of their heuristic and therapeutic potential. (1) They feel extremely real and authentic and often mediate access to accurate information about historical periods, cultures, and even historical events that the individual could not have acquired through the ordinary channels. (2) In some instances, the accuracy of these memories can be objectively verified, sometimes with amazing detail. (3) They are often involved in pathodynamics of various emotional, psychosomatic, and interpersonal problems. It seems to matter little to the psyche whether the pathogenic forces are related to events from ancient Egypt, Nazi Germany, prenatal life, birth of the individual, or from the infancy and childhood in the present lifetime. (4) They have a great therapeutic potential, more powerful than memories from the present lifetime. (5) They are often associated with amazing meaningful synchronicities.

The criteria for verification are the same as those for determining what happened last year: identify specific memories and secure independent evidence for at least some of them. Naturally, past life memories are more difficult to verify. They do not always contain specific information that would render itself to a verification procedure. Evidence is harder to come by, since they are much older and involve other countries and cultures. It is

important to consider that even our current memories cannot always be corroborated, only some of them. Most evoked memories do not permit the same degree of verification as Stevenson's spontaneous memories, which are typically more recent. However, I have myself observed and published several remarkable cases, where most unusual aspects of such experiences could be verified by independent historical research (Grof 1985, 1987).

I am including two of these stories to illustrate the remarkable nature of this material. In the first of them the karmic pattern started to emerge during sessions of primal therapy and continued in sessions of *Holotropic Breathwork*.

At an early stage of his therapy when Karl was re-living various aspects of his birth trauma, he started experiencing fragments of dramatic scenes that seemed to be happening in another century and in a foreign country. They involved powerful emotions and physical feelings and seemed to have some deep and intimate connection to his life; yet none of them made any sense in terms of his present biography.

He had visions of tunnels, underground storage spaces, military barracks, thick walls, and ramparts that all seemed to be parts of a fortress situated on a rock overlooking an ocean shore. This was interspersed with images of soldiers in a variety of situations. He felt puzzled, since the soldiers seemed to be Spanish, but the scenery looked more like Scotland or Ireland.

As the process continued, the scenes were becoming more dramatic and involved, many of them representing fierce combat and bloody slaughter. Although surrounded by soldiers, Karl experienced

himself as a priest and at one point had a very moving vision that involved a bible and a cross. At this point, he saw a seal ring on his hand and could clearly recognize the initials that it bore.

Being a talented artist, he decided to document this strange process, although he did not understand it at the time. He produced a series of drawings and very powerful and impulsive finger paintings. Some of these depicted different parts of the fortress, others scenes of slaughter, and a few his own experiences, including being gored by a sword, thrown over the ramparts of the fortress, and dying on the shore. Among these pictures was a drawing of the seal ring with the initials.

As he was recovering bits and pieces of this story, Karl was finding more and more meaningful connections with his present life. He was discovering that many emotional and psychosomatic feelings, as well as problems in interpersonal relationships that he had at that time in his everyday life, were clearly related to his inner process, involving the mysterious event in the past.

A turning point came when Karl suddenly decided on an impulse to spend his holiday in Western Ireland. After his return, he was showing in the family for the first time the slides that he had shot on the Western coast of Ireland. He realized that he had taken eleven consecutive pictures of the same scenery that did not seem particularly interesting. He took the map and reconstructed where he stood at the time and in which direction he was shooting. He realized that the place, which attracted his attention, was the ruin of an old fortress called Dunanoir, or Forte de Oro (*Golden Fortress*).

Suspecting a connection with his experiences from his inner exploration, Karl decided to study the history of Dunanoir. He discovered, to his enormous surprise, that at the time of Walter Ra-

leigh, the fortress was taken by the Spaniards and then besieged by the British. Walter Raleigh negotiated with the Spaniards and promised them free egress from the fortress, if they would open the gate and surrender to the British. The Spaniards agreed on these conditions, but the British did not hold their promise. Once inside the fortress, they slaughtered mercilessly all the Spaniards and threw them over the ramparts to die on the ocean beach.

In spite of this absolutely astonishing confirmation of the story that he laboriously reconstructed in his sessions, Karl was not satisfied. He continued his library research until he discovered a special document about the battle of Dunanoir. There he found that a priest accompanied the Spanish soldiers and was killed together with them. The initials of the name of the priest were identical with those that Karl saw in his vision of the seal ring and depicted in one of his drawings.

The following illustration is one of the most unusual coincidences that I have encountered during my LSD work. The phenomena involved have an ambiguous quality, since they have the combined characteristics of ancestral and past-incarnation experiences. This example shows clearly the complexity of this area of research. It is taken from the treatment of a patient suffering from cancer-phobia.

In the advanced stage of Renata's therapy, an unusual and unprecedented sequence of events was observed. Four consecutive LSD sessions consisted almost exclusively of scenes from a particular historical period from the Czech history. She experienced a number of episodes that took place in Prague during the seventeenth century. This time was a crucial period for the Czechs. After the di-

sastrous battle of White Mountain in 1621, which marked the beginning of the Thirty Years' War in Europe, the country ceased to exist as an independent kingdom and came under the hegemony of the Habsburg dynasty that lasted 300 years.

In an effort to destroy the feelings of national pride and defeat the forces of resistance, the Habsburgs sent out mercenaries to capture the country's most prominent noblemen. Twenty-seven outstanding members of the nobility were arrested and beheaded in a public execution on scaffolding erected on the Old Town Square in Prague. During her historical sessions, Renata had an unusual variety of images and insights concerning the architecture of the experienced period and typical garments and costumes, as well as weapons and various utensils used in everyday life. She was also able to describe many of the complicated relationships existing at that time between the royal family and the vassals. Renata had never specifically studied this period, and I had to consult special books in order to confirm the reported information.

Many of her experiences were related to various periods in the life of a young nobleman, one of the twenty-seven members of the aristocracy beheaded by the Habsburgs. In a dramatic sequence, Renata finally relived with powerful emotions and in considerable detail the actual events of the execution, including this nobleman's intense anguish and agony. In all these scenes, Renata experienced full identification with this individual. She was not quite clear how these historical sequences were related to her present personality and what they meant. She finally concluded that these experiences must have been relivings of events from the life of one of her ancestors, although this was against her personal beliefs and philosophy.

Being a close witness of this emotional drama, I shared Renata's bewilderment and confusion. Trying to decipher this enigma, I chose two different approaches. On the one hand, I spent a considerable amount of time trying to verify the historical information involved and was increasingly impressed by its accuracy. On the other hand, I tried to apply the psychoanalytic approach to the content of Renata's stories hoping that I would be able to understand them in psychodynamic terms as a symbolic disguise for her childhood experiences or elements of her present life situation. No matter how hard I tried, the experiential sequences did not make any sense from this point of view. I finally gave up on this problem when Renata's LSD experiences moved into new areas. Focusing on other more immediate tasks, I stopped thinking about this peculiar incident.

Two years later, when I was already in the United States, I received a long letter from Renata with the following unusual introduction: "Dear Dr. Grof, you will probably think that I am absolutely insane when I share with you the results of my recent private search." In the text that followed, Renata described how she had happened to meet her father, whom she had not seen since her parents' divorce when she was three years old. After a short discussion, her father invited her to have dinner with him, his second wife, and their children. After dinner, he told her that he wanted to show her the results of his favorite hobby, which she might find interesting.

During World War II, the Nazis issued a special order that every family in the occupied countries had to present to the German authorities its pedigree demonstrating the absence of persons of Jewish origin for the last five generations. Working on the family genealogy because of existential

necessity, Renata's father became absolutely fascinated by this procedure. After he had completed the required five-generation pedigree for the authorities, he continued this activity because of his private interest, tracing the history of his family back through the centuries, thanks to the relatively complete system of birth records kept in the archives of parish houses in European countries. With considerable pride, Renata's father pointed to large and carefully designed ramified pedigree of their family, and showed her that they were descendants of one of the noblemen executed after the battle of White Mountain.

After having described this episode in the letter, Renata expressed how happy she was to have obtained this independent confirmation of her "gut feeling" that her ancestral memory was authentic. She saw this as a proof that highly emotionally charged memories can be imprinted in the genetic code and transmitted through centuries to future generations. When I got over my initial amazement regarding this most unusual coincidence, I discovered a rather serious logical inconsistency in Renata's account. One of the experiences she had had in her historical LSD sessions was the reliving of the terminal anguish of the nobleman during his own execution. And, naturally, physical death terminates the possibility of further genetic transfer; it destroys the biological hereditary line. A dead person cannot procreate and "genetically" pass the memory of his terminal anguish to future generations.

Before completely discarding the information contained in Renata's letter as supportive evidence for her experiences, several facts deserve serious consideration. None of the remaining Czech patients, who had a total of over two thousand sessions, had

ever even mentioned this historical period. In Renata's case, four consecutive LSD sessions contained almost exclusively, historical sequences from this time. It is practically out of question that something like this is a mere meaningless coincidence. The absence of a conventional pathway for biological transfer of this information and the independent confirmation of Renata's experiences by her father's independent genealogical quest suggest a situation that characterizes past life experiences. In any case, it is hard to imagine any plausible explanation of this astonishing coincidence that would not violate some basic assumptions of traditional Western science.

3.2.4 Attempts at experimental verification of past life experiences

Some interesting experimental work has been done with hypnosis aimed at obtaining verifiable data about reincarnation. The objections against this kind of research emphasize the danger of suggestion. However, a strong case can be made for information that comes from a skilled use of hypnosis and is verifiable. Helen Wambach regressed 750 subjects into various past lives and employing a detailed sociological questionnaire, she collected from them specific information about costumes, food, weapons, money, and other aspects of the periods involved. She has often found verification even in the smallest details. Interestingly, the balance of males and females was maintained in her work, except during wartime when women were more numerous than men. Famous personalities were not more frequent; most

were lives in poverty, boring, and without color. There was not a single case of a famous historical person (Wambach 1979).

3.2.5 Tibetan practices relevant to the problem of reincarnation

Tibetan spiritual literature describes some interesting phenomena, suggesting that certain highly developed human beings are able to gain far-reaching knowledge related to the process of reincarnation. This includes the possibility of exerting influence on the time of one's death, predicting or even directing the time and place of one's next incarnation, and maintaining consciousness through the intermediate states (*bardos*) between death and next incarnation. Conversely, accomplished Tibetan monks can through various clues received in dreams, meditation, and through other channels locate and identify the child who is the reincarnation of the Dalai Lama or a *tulku*. The child is then exposed to a test during which it has to identify correctly from several sets of similar objects those that belonged to the deceased. Some aspects of this practice could, at least theoretically, be subjected to a rather rigorous testing following Western standards.

3.3 Apparitions of the dead and communication with them

Direct experiences of encounter and communication with deceased persons do not occur only around the time when these people died or as part of the NDEs, but also at a later date, spontaneously or in the context of NOSC induced by psychedelics, experiential psychotherapies, or meditation. Naturally, the

data from this area have to be evaluated particularly carefully and critically. The simple fact of a private experience of this kind does not really amount to very much and can easily be dismissed as a wishful fantasy or hallucination. Some additional factors must be present before the experiences constitute interesting research material. And it is, of course, important to make a distinction between those apparitions that seem to satisfy some strong need of the percipient and others, where any motivation of this kind cannot be found.

It is important to mention that some of the apparitions have certain characteristics that make them very interesting or even challenging for researchers. There exist a number of cases reported in the literature that describe apparitions of persons unknown to the percipient, who are later identified through photographs and verbal descriptions. It also is not uncommon that such apparitions are witnessed collectively or by many different individuals over long periods of time, such as it is the case in "haunted" houses and castles. In some instances, the apparitions can have distinct distinguishing bodily marks accrued around the time of death unbeknownst to the percipient. Of particular interest are those cases where the deceased convey some specific and accurate new information that can be verified or is linked with an extraordinary synchronicity. I have myself observed in LSD therapy and in *Holotropic Breathwork* several amazing instances of the second kind. Here are three examples to illustrate the nature of such observations.

The first of these examples is an event that

occurred during LSD therapy of a young depressed patient who had made repeated suicidal attempts.

In one of his LSD sessions, Richard had a very unusual experience involving a strange and uncanny astral realm. This domain had an eerie luminescence and was filled with discarnate beings that were trying to communicate with him in a very urgent and demanding manner. He could not see or hear them; however, he sensed their almost tangible presence and was receiving telepathic messages from them. I wrote down one of these messages that was very specific and could be subjected to subsequent verification.

It was a request for Richard to connect with a couple in the Moravian city of Kroměříž and let them know that their son Ladislav was doing all right and was well taken care of. The message included the couple's name, street address, and telephone number; all of these data were unknown to the patient and me. This experience was extremely puzzling; it seemed to be an alien enclave in Richard's experience, totally unrelated to his problems and the rest of his treatment.

After some hesitation and with mixed feelings, I finally decided to do what certainly would have made me the target of my colleagues' jokes, had they found out. I went to the telephone, dialed the number in Kroměříž, and asked if I could speak with Ladislav. To my astonishment, the woman on the other side of the line started to cry.

When she calmed down, she told me with a broken voice: "Our son is not with us any more; he passed away, we lost him three weeks ago."

The second illustrative example involves a close friend and former colleague of mine, Walter N. Pahnke, who was a member of our

psychedelic research team at the Maryland Psychiatric Research Center in Baltimore. He had deep interest in parapsychology, particularly in the problem of consciousness after death, and worked with many famous mediums and psychics, including his friend Eileen Garrett, president of the American Parapsychological Association. In addition, he was also the initiator of the LSD program for patients dying of cancer.

In summer 1971, Walter went with his wife Eva and their children for a vacation in a cabin in Maine, situated right on the ocean. One day, he went scuba diving all by himself and did not return. An extensive and well-organized search failed to find his body or any part of his diving gear. Under these circumstances, Eva found it very difficult to accept and integrate his death. Her last memory of Walter when he was leaving the cabin involved him full of energy and in perfect health. It was hard for her to believe that he was not part of her life any more and to start a new chapter of her existence without a sense of closure of the preceding one.

Being a psychologist herself, she qualified for an LSD training session for mental health professionals offered through a special program in our institute. She decided to have a psychedelic experience with the hope of getting some more insights and asked me to be her sitter. In the second half of the session, she had a very powerful vision of Walter and carried on a long and meaningful dialogue with him. He gave her specific instructions concerning each of their three children and released her to start a new life of her own, unencumbered and unrestricted by a sense of commitment to his memory. It was a very profound and liberating experience.

Just as Eva was questioning whether the entire

episode was just a wishful fabrication of her own mind, Walter appeared once more for a brief period of time and asked Eva to return a book that he had borrowed from a friend of his. He then proceeded to give her the name of the friend, the room where it was, the name of the book, the shelf, and the sequential order of the book on this shelf. Following the instructions, Eva was actually able to find and return the book, about the existence of which she had had no previous knowledge.

One of the psychologists participating in our three year professional training had witnessed a wide variety of transpersonal experiences during the Holotropic Breathwork sessions of his colleagues, and he had a few of them himself. However, he continued to be very skeptical about the authenticity of these phenomena, constantly questioning whether or not they deserved any special attention. Then, in one of his holotropic sessions, he experienced an unusual synchronicity that convinced him that he might have been too conservative in his approach to human consciousness.

Toward the end of the session, he had a vivid experience of encountering his grandmother, who had been dead for many years. He had been very close to her in his childhood and he was deeply moved by the possibility that he might be really communicating with her again. In spite of a deep emotional involvement in the experience, he continued to maintain an attitude of professional skepticism about the encounter. Naturally, he had had many real interactions with his grandmother while she was alive and theorized that his mind could have easily created an imaginary encounter from these old memories.

However, this meeting with his dead grandmoth-

er was so emotionally profound and convincing that he simply could not dismiss it as a wishful fantasy. He decided to seek proof that the experience was real, not just his imagination. He asked his grandmother for some form of confirmation and received the following message: "Go to aunt Anna and look for cut roses." Still skeptical, he decided on the following weekend to visit his aunt Anna's home and see what would happen.

Upon his arrival, he found his aunt in the garden, surrounded by cut roses. He was astonished. The day of his visit just happened to be the one-day of the year that his aunt had decided to do some radical pruning of her roses.

Experiences of this kind are certainly far from being a definitive proof of the existence of astral realms and discarnate beings. However, these astonishing synchronicities clearly suggest that this fascinating area deserves serious attention of consciousness researchers.

Of special interest is the quasi-experimental evidence suggestive of survival of consciousness after death that comes from the highly charged and controversial area of spiritistic seances and mental or trance mediumship. Although some of the professional mediums have been caught cheating, others such as Mrs. Piper, Mrs. Leonard, and Mrs. Verall, withstood all the tests and gained a high esteem of careful and reputable researchers (Grosso 1994). The best media have been able to accurately reproduce in their performance the deceased's voice, speech patterns, gestures, mannerisms, and other characteristic features.

On occasion, the received information was unknown to any of the present persons or even to any living person whatsoever. There

also have been instances of sudden intrusion of uninvited “drop-in” entities whose identities were later confirmed. In other instances, relevant messages were received in “proxy sittings”, where a distant and uninformed party sought information in lieu of a close relative or friend of the deceased. In the cases of “cross correspondence”, bits and pieces of a comprehensive message are conveyed through several mediums. An interesting innovation in this area is the procedure described in Raymond Moody’s book *Reunions* (Moody 1993). Using perceptual ambiguity involved in mirror gazing, Moody induces in his subjects convincing visionary encounters with deceased loved ones.

Some of the spiritistic reports considerably stretch the mind of an average Westerner, let alone a traditionally trained scientist. For example, the extreme form of spiritistic phenomena, the “physical mediumship”, includes among others telekinesis and materializations, for example, upward levitation of objects and people, projection of objects through the air, manifestation of ectoplasmic formations, and appearance of writings or objects without explanation (“*apports*”). In the Brazilian spiritist movement, media perform psychic surgeries using their hands or knives allegedly under the guidance of the spirits of deceased people. These surgeries do not require any anesthesia and the wounds close without sutures. Events of this kind have been repeatedly studied and filmed by Western researchers of the stature of Walter Pahnke, Stanley Krippner and Andrija Puharich.

A relatively recent development in the efforts to communicate with spirits of deceased

people is an approach called *instrumental transcommunication* (ITC) that uses for this purpose modern electronic technology. This avenue began when in 1959 filmmaker Friedrich Juergensen picked up on an audiotape human voices of allegedly dead persons while recording the sounds of passerine birds. Inspired by this event, psychologist Konstantin Raudive (Raudive 1971) conducted a systematic study of this phenomenon and recorded over 100 000 multilingual paranormal voices allegedly communicating messages from the Beyond.

More recently, a worldwide network of researchers, including Ernest Senkowski, George Meek, Mark Macy, Scott Rogo, Raymond Bayless, and others, have been involved in a group effort to establish “*interdimensional transcommunication*”. They claim to have received many paranormal verbal communications and pictures from the deceased through electronic media, including tape recorders, telephones, FAX machines, computers, and TV screens. Among the spirits communicating from Beyond are supposedly some of the former researchers in this field, such as Juergensen and Raudive (Senkowski 1994).

4 Individual and social implications of the research on death and dying

The research of the psychological philosophical, and spiritual aspects of death and dying discussed in this paper has considerable theoretical and practical implications. The experiences and observations I have explored

certainly are not an unequivocal "proof" of survival of consciousness after death, of the existence of astral realms inhabited by discarnate beings, or of reincarnation of the individual unit of consciousness and continuation of its physical existence in another lifetime. It is possible to imagine other types of interpretation of the same data, such as extraordinary and amazing paranormal capacities of human consciousness (*superpsi*) or the Hindu concept of the universe as *lila*, the divine play of consciousness of the cosmic creative principle.

However, one thing seems to be clear: none of the interpretations based on careful analysis of these data would be compatible with the Cartesian-Newtonian paradigm of Western materialistic science. Systematic examination and unbiased evaluation of this material would necessarily result in an entirely new understanding of the nature of consciousness, its role in the universal scheme of things, and its relationship to matter and, more specifically, the brain. Mainstream academic science has been defending, often quite aggressively and authoritatively, its basic metaphysical assumption that human consciousness is the product of neurophysiological processes in the brain and is fully contained inside the skull. This position inherited from seventeenth century philosophy and science has thus far been impervious to modern discoveries ranging from transpersonal psychology and various areas of consciousness research to quantum-relativistic physics. It can be maintained only by systematic suppression of a vast amount of data from various disciplines, a basic strategy that is characteristic for fundamentalist religions,

but one that should not exist in science.

Beside their theoretical relevance, the issues discussed in this paper have also great practical significance. I have explored at some length in other publications (Grof 1985, 1987) the importance of death for psychiatry, psychology, and psychotherapy. Our past encounters with death in the form of vital threats during our postnatal history, the trauma of birth, and embryonal existence are deeply imprinted in our unconscious. In addition, the motif of death plays also an important role in the transpersonal domain of the human psyche in connection with powerful archetypal and karmic material. In all these varieties, the theme of death and dying contributes significantly to the development of emotional and psychosomatic disorders.

Conversely, confronting this material and coming to terms with the fear of death is conducive to healing, positive personality transformation, and consciousness evolution. As we discussed in connection with the ancient mysteries of death and rebirth, this "dying before dying" influences deeply the quality of life and the basic strategy of existence. It reduces irrational drives ("rat race" or "treadmill" type of existence) and increases the ability to live in the present and to enjoy simple life activities. Another important consequence of freeing oneself from the fear of death is a radical opening to spirituality of a universal and non-denominational type. This tends to occur whether the encounter with death happens during a real brush with death in an NDE, or in a purely psychological way, such as in meditation, experiential therapy, or a spontaneous psychospiritual crisis

(spiritual emergency).

In conclusion, I would like to mention briefly some of the broadest possible implications of this material. Whether or not we believe in survival of consciousness after death, reincarnation, and karma has very serious implications for our behavior. The idea that belief in immortality has profound moral implications can be found already in Plato, who in *Laws* has Socrates say that disconcert for the post mortem consequences of one's deeds would be "a boon to the wicked". Modern authors, such as Alan Harrington (Harrington 1969) and Ernest Becker (Becker 1973) have emphasized that massive denial of death leads to social pathologies that have dangerous consequences for humanity. Modern consciousness research certainly supports this point of view (Grof 1985).

At a time when a combination of unbridled greed, malignant aggression, and existence of weapons of mass destruction threatens the survival of humanity and possibly life on this planet, we should seriously consider any avenue that offers some hope. While this is not a sufficient reason for embracing uncritically the material suggesting survival of consciousness after death, it should be an additional incentive for reviewing the existing data with an open mind and in the spirit of true science. The same applies to the powerful experiential technologies involving NOSC that make it possible to confront the fear of death and can facilitate deep positive personality changes and spiritual opening. A radical inner transformation and rise to a new level of consciousness might be the only real hope we have in the current global crisis.

References

- Alexander, Franz. 1931. "Buddhist Training As Artificial Catatonia." *Psychoanalytic Review* 18:129-145.
- Bache, Christopher. 1988. *Lifecycles: Reincarnation and the Web of Life*. New York: Paragon.
- Becker, Ernest. 1973. *The Denial of Death*. New York: The Free Press.
- Bozzano, Ernesto. 1948. *Dei Fenomeni di Telekinesia in Rapporto con Eventi di Morti*. Casa Editrice Europa.
- Delacour, Jean Baptiste. 1974. *Glimpses of the Beyond*. New York: Delacorte.
- Foerster, Heinz von. 1965. "Memory Without A Record." In *The Anatomy of Memory*, edited by Daniel P. Kimble. Palo Alto: Science and Behavior Books.
- Flynn, Charles. 1986. *After the Beyond: Human Transformation and the Near-Death Experience*. Englewood-Cliffs: Prentice-Hall.
- Greyson, Bruce, and Charles Flynn (eds.). 1984. *The Near-Death Experience: Problems, Prospects, Perspectives*. Springfield: Charles C. Thomas.
- Grof, Stanislav, and Joan Halifax. 1977. *The Human Encounter with Death*. New York: E. P. Dutton.
- Grof, Stanislav, and Christina Grof. 1980. *Beyond Death*. London: Thames & Hudson.
- Grof, Stanislav. 1985. *Beyond the Brain: Birth, Death, and Transcendence in Psychotherapy*. Albany: SUNY.
- Grof, Stanislav. 1988. *The Adventure of Self-Discovery*. Albany: SUNY.

- Grof, Stanislav. 1992. *The Holotropic Mind*. San Francisco: HarperCollins.
- Grof, Stanislav. 1994. *Books of the Dead*. London: Thames & Hudson.
- Grosso, Michael. 1994. "The Status of Survival Research: Evidence, Problems, Paradigms." Paper presented at the Institute of Noetic Sciences Symposium The Survival of Consciousness After Death, Chicago.
- Harrington, Alan. 1969. *The Immortalist*. Milbrae: Celestial Arts.
- Laszlo, Ervin. 1994. *The Creative Cosmos*. Edinburgh: Floris Books.
- Moody, Raymond A. 1975. *Life After Life*. New York: Bantam.
- Moody, Raymond A. 1993. *Reunions*. New York: Villard Books.
- Osis, Karlis. 1961. *Deathbed Observations of Physicians and Nurses*. New York: Parapsychology Foundation.
- Osis, Karlis, and Donna McCormick. 1980. "Kinetic Effects at the Ostensible Location of an Out-of-Body Projection During Perceptual Testing." *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research* 74:319-24.
- Raudive, Konstantin. 1971. *Breakthrough*. New York: Lancer Books.
- Ring, Kenneth. 1982. *Life at Death: A Scientific Investigation of the Near-Death Experience*. New York: Quill.
- Ring, Kenneth. 1985. *Heading Toward Omega: In Search of the Meaning of the Near-Death Experience*. New York: Quill.
- Rogo, David Scott. 1990. *The Return from Silence: A Study of Near-Death Experiences*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Sabom, Michael. 1982. *Recollections of Death: A Medical Investigation*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Senkowski, Ernst. 1994. "Instrumental Transcommunication." Lecture presented at the Institute for Noetic Sciences, Corte Madera.
- Sheldrake, Rupert. 1981. *A New Science of Life*. Los Angeles: J. P. Tarcher.
- Sidgwick, Henry et al. 1889. "Report on the Census of Hallucinations." *Proc. S.P.R.* 10: 245-51.
- Stevenson, Ian. 1966. *Twenty Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press.
- Stevenson, Ian. 1984. *Unlearned Language*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press.
- Stevenson, Ian. 1987. *Children Who Remember Previous Lives*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press.
- Tart, Charles. 1968. "A Psychophysiological Study of Out-of-Body Phenomena." *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 62:3-27.
- Wambach, Helen. 1979. *Life Before Life*. New York: Bantam.
- Wasson, Gordon, Albert Hofmann, and Carl A. P. Ruck. 1978. *The Road to Eleusis: Unveiling the Secret of the Mysteries*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- Weisse, Jess E. 1972. *The Vestibule*. Port Washington: Ashley Books.

About the author

Stanislav Grof M.D. (1931) is a psychiatrist and a pioneering researcher into the use of non-ordinary states of consciousness for purposes of exploring, healing, and obtaining insights into the human psyche. He is one of the founders of transpersonal psychology. In 2007 Stanislav Grof received the VISION 97 award granted by the Foundation of Dagmar and Václav Havel in Prague.

*This article is published in Spirituality Studies 1 (2) Fall 2015.
To read this issue please click on the image below:*

