

Mystical Awakening Through Close Encounter with Death

A Significant New Inter-Religious Spiritual Phenomenon

By John Wren-Lewis

Professor John Wren-Lewis, originally a native of England, now lives in retirement in Australia, where he is an Honorary Associate of the University of Sydney's School of Studies in Religion. He first became internationally known in the 1950s and 60s for his writings on the relations between science and religion, which played a major part in starting the so-called "Death of God" or "Honest to God" movement. At that time he was professionally engaged in scientific research and research planning for a major international corporation, but in the early 1970s he studied psychology and philosophy of religion, and held visiting professorships at several universities and colleges in England and the United States. Since 1983 he has been mainly engaged in research on the topic of this article, following his own close encounter with death on a bus in Thailand.

You will feel like one come back from the dead. This is true realization.

Bassui Tokusho (Rinzai Zen Master, 1327-1387)

In earlier centuries, tales of people being miraculously rescued from the brink of death and returning with strange reports of other dimensions of life were the stuff of legend, superstition and religious propaganda. Today the miracles of science have made such occurrences almost commonplace, and scientists themselves, professionally trained in skepticism towards legend and superstition, are being impelled to investigate what such experiences mean¹. The phenomenon has even acquired the dignity of an official medical name reducible to initials—"near-Death Experience" (NDE) and the 1980s saw the establishment of a prestigious International Association for Near-Death Studies, (IANDS) which publishes a first-class Journal of Near-Death Studies². I am calling attention to it here because I believe it is in fact an "inter-religious" phenomenon of the highest importance for the future.

One of the first facts to emerge from systematic study of the subject was that very large numbers of these experiences have gone unrecorded because skeptically-biased medical authorities had simply dismissed them as hallucinations produced by the brain under stress, or by the drugs used in surgery. Indeed, many people have admitted keeping quiet about their experiences for fear of being thought crazy. Detailed questioning by sympathetic investigators has revealed, however, that amongst the many thousands of people who are nowadays snatched back every year from the very last stages of heart attacks, electric shock, drowning and other traumas, about one-third insist they experienced something for which terms like “hallucination” are utterly inappropriate.

Individual descriptions vary enormously, and many are simply called “indescribable,” but there’s an almost universal insistence on “something rich and strange”, like the opening-up of a whole new dimension in consciousness, which has given the person a hitherto undreamed-of level of confidence, equilibrium and creative energy—all the symptoms, in fact, of sanity rather than craziness. Anxiety in general, and fear of death in particular, have been dramatically reduced or even abolished by the experience, along with the everyday manifestations of anxiety like boredom, restlessness, competitiveness, acquisitiveness and aggression. No fantasy due to brain aberration has ever been known to produce effects like these, nor any drug, and NDEs quite often occur when no drug is involved; Yet the effects can't be explained simply as *joi de vivre* after a close shave, because such changes aren't reported on anything like the same scale by the larger group of survivors who recall no special experience; on the contrary, such people often have greater fear of death precisely because the narrow escape has made them value life more.

And these are not just matters of personal testimony. Professionals like Dr. Kenneth Ring, professor of psychology at the University of Connecticut, and British psychologist Dr. Margot Grey in her PhD research at the University of London, have carried out batteries of tests to confirm these very positive characteristics of post-NDE lives³. Other investigators have shown that NDEs and their remarkable results are not confined to any particular sex, race, personality-type, educational level, religious background, or socio-economic class; and they can happen to people with almost any prior philosophy of life, or no articulated philosophy at all. IANDS(USA) has even documented some remarkable NDE accounts from children, which have been summarized in a recent book by Seattle pediatrician Dr. Melvyn Morse, along with fascinating

firsthand accounts of cases he has encountered in his own practice⁴.

The publication of such findings has started a snowballing effect as more and more people who have had NDEs in the past are emboldened to come out of the closet, while even skeptical doctors—probably still a substantial majority in the profession as a whole—are beginning to take the phenomenon seriously enough to contribute to the factual record of evidence. And at this stage of the game, skepticism has an important positive role to play, for two reasons:

A healthy discipline of skepticism is obviously essential in evaluating NDE reports, and it's equally important when looking for patterns in the data that might provide clues to what these experiences are really all about. The human mind has a tendency, even in the most sincere inquirers, to jump to conclusions and then ignore, play down or distort any evidence that doesn't fit. Five hundred years ago, Christopher Columbus saddled the native peoples of America with the name "Indians" because he'd set out to find a round-the-world route to the Orient and didn't realize he'd actually discovered a whole new continent. The same kind of mistake, which I've proposed calling "the Columbus Confusion", has occurred even in the most hard-nosed scientific investigations, and it's very likely to happen in studying NDEs because this subject touches on such deep human concerns.

The most obvious instance is the disproportionate amount of attention given to reports of people seeing their own near-dead bodies from above (usually from a point somewhere near the ceiling in the operating theater, or a few feet above the car that's just crashed) and/or tunnel to a heavenly light beyond. In the early days of NDE studies, in the 1970s, these two kinds of experience attracted the attention of many researchers, even though they occur in only a minority of cases, because they strongly suggest that human consciousness may be independent of the physical brain and might make a transition to some non-physical realm when the body dies, as claimed in one way or another by religious traditions from time immemorial. Today these images have become so established in popular mythology that the Monty Python team could satirize the tunnel trip in their movie *The Meaning of Life* — the heaven at the tunnel's end being depicted as a luxury hotel with a Hollywood-style Great Christmas Cabaret permanently in progress.

And this isn't just the outcome of sensational journalism, though NDEs have been subjected to quite a bit of that. Many serious researchers still lay special emphasis on the minority of NDEs which seem to indicate the independence of consciousness from the brain, most notably, cases where the famous flat line of electronic brain-monitors seems to prove that the patient really has died, and those special "out-of-body" experiences (sometimes call OOBEs) where the person was apparently able to travel to a distant place, or to another room in the hospital, and bring back accurate information about things which couldn't have been known by any physical means⁵.

Of courses, these claims are important, and if in due course the evidence for cases like this stands up to proper critical scrutiny, science will have to revise some of its current materialistic concepts about consciousness as merely a brain-function. But this may be a complete red herring in terms of understanding what NDEs in general are about, comparable to Columbus noticing an American native who happened to look very like drawings of East Indian peoples. For the plain fact is that just as most Native Americans don't look like East Indians, so the great majority of NDEs don't really look like glimpses of the soul leaving the body and entering a literal Other World; they can be fitted into that model only by ignoring or fudging the evidence.

Many NDEs don't involve visions at all. Those who have experiences simply use expressions like "indescribably blissful peace", "a kind of dreamless depth that wasn't somehow unconscious", "an incredible sense of sinking into pure timeless love"; yet their lives are still changed in extremely positive ways, and they still lose their former fear of death. And even amongst experiences that do sound like other world visions, the vast majority can't seriously be accepted as literal glimpses of an undiscovered country beyond the grave, because they contradict one another in many significant details.

Some, for example, describe the heavenly landscape as a pastoral scene; others as a sci-fi-style Celestial City; others as an insubstantial cloudy space; and still others as human scenes almost justifying the Monty Python spoof. The much-publicised experiences of encountering long-dead relatives sometimes find them at the age they were when they died; sometimes as old as they would have been now if they'd lived; sometimes miraculously rejuvenated; and sometimes totally transfigured into shining angelic forms that are nonetheless recognizable. A very small number of NDEs include visions of hellish regions, reminiscent of the old Christian stories, yet the vast majority emphasize the total absence of

anything unpleasant, even though the subjects of the experiences are in many cases anything but saints⁶.

In fact it's obvious, when all the evidence is considered, that play of imagination must be involved to a considerable degree in most NDEs, hence probably in all — and this would still be true even if it could be proved that consciousness was functioning without the brain. Similarly, for every “out-of-body” experience that looks like an accurate psychic perception of real physical events, there are dozens that quite plainly are plays of imagination, however vivid they seem, since they involve definite non-events. A dramatic example of this was given by the great Swiss psychologist Carl Jung when he had a near-fatal heart attack in 1944, long before the term NDE had been coined⁷. He seemed to leave his body and soar high into space, getting a view of the earth's globe such as no human eye at that time and ever seen, though astronauts have since done so. But he also encountered an asteroid-type rock with a Hindu temple carved into it, manned by a swami sitting in lotus posture amidst flickering candles, and there certainly aren't any of *those* fifteen hundred kilometers up in real physical space! Even supernatural space, if there is such, is unlikely to contain anything like that in any literal sense, unless the universe is as silly as Monty Python proposes.

It is of course this obvious imaginative element in NDEs that has led many dogmatic religious authorities, who believe they already know from divine revelation what really happens at death, to join hands with materialists in dismissing the whole phenomenon as mere fantasy. Several cases are on record of hospital chaplains doing this, thereby driving patients who have had NDE's firmly into the closet. In marked contrast, however, experiencers themselves, while insisting that their experiences were utterly real, are usually resistant to dogmatism of any kind, *even if before their NED they had held a rigid faith*. This was discovered by Professor Ring in America, and has recently been confirmed in Australia by Dr. Cherie Sutherland in the course of a PhD research project at the University of New South Wales⁸. NDEs seem to have the effect of making people willing to acknowledge and affirm one another's experiences as valid even when they differ markedly in details or form-yet they all make statement like, “This was the most real thing that has ever happened to me.”

Clearly, the word “real” is here being used to mean something other than merely “literal-and-not-involving-imagination”, and over the past few years many NDE researchers (of whom I am one)⁹ have been coming to the conclusion that this is the essential clue to the “new continent” discovered

by travellers who return from the brink. Irrespective of whatever NDEs may prove, much further down the track, about the possibility of consciousness separating from the brain and surviving the body's death in some other realm, they are already discoveries of a hitherto unsuspected depth-dimension in consciousness itself (unsuspected, that is, except by those strange individuals usually called mystics); and this is experienced as "real alikeness", an intensity of living that makes ordinary worldly existence seem like a mere play of shadows.

Although the time at the brink during which the experience takes place may be only minutes or even seconds by the hospital clocks, the experience itself has a quality of *timeless* depth and intensity, bringing with it a feeling of utter well-being that's often called indescribable, though "peace beyond understanding" gives a faint hint of it. This is an almost universal feature of NDEs, it even comes at the end in most of those very rare ones that start off "hellish"; and it is shared both by experiencers who describe enormous "other world journeys" and by the many others, like me when I nearly died from poisoning in 1983, who report only the sense of an infinite alikeness, peace and wellbeing which seems altogether beyond time.

My personal hypothesis would be that the other world journeys (tunnel trips included) are the mind's efforts to express this inexpressible "extra dimension" in symbolic dream-style images, though I'd add that experiences are absolutely justified in insisting that they're more real than any dream, because ordinary dreams express only the feelings of ordinary life¹⁰, whereas NDEs involve this whole other order of "real alikeness" which mystics have usually called Eternity. I'd say, for instance, that the experiences who claim they met lost loved ones in heaven are in no way deluded, for although my own experience wasn't quite like that, its timeless depth seemed to include a unity of all beings every bit as real-indeed more real-than the relationships of everyday life I'd known beforehand.

Now even if there were no more to NDEs than the discovery that dying can be something like the ultimate mystical trip, it would still carry more importance for humanity's future than anything Columbus discovered; it would justify urgent research, for example, to find out why approach to death happens this way for some and not for others, and whether there's any way to make it universally available. But my own experience has convinced me there's an even more important prospect. While many experiences report that medical resuscitation brought them back with enormous reluctance from the heavenly "place" to the narrow ordinary world, I for some reason brought the timeless depth of

consciousness back with me, and I've been "simply living" with it in *this* world ever since. As a result, I've been, and still am, experiencing this world as anything but narrow, in a way I'd never have believed possible during my fifty-nine-odd years before the NDE (In those days I had no time for mystics.)¹¹

There's no space here to tell all the details of my story, but that's not my purpose in this article anyway. I'm mentioning it because my experience led me, once I'd acclimatized myself to living what I can only call a heavenly life right here on earth, to go into NDE research and question other experiences about their "lives after resurrection." I found that many of them agree, once asked, that their newfound confidence, vitality and sense of meaning sprang from the fact that they too were now living with a definite residual sense of what I've come to call Eternity Consciousness (though I've not yet met anyone whose change was quite as dramatic as mine seems to have been). And when in due course I caught up with Professor Ring's researches, I found he'd been coming to a similar conclusion, without any "bias" from an experience of his own. He'd found that the experiences he'd studied were living more fully, not primarily because they'd become convinced of immortality beyond the grave as he'd at first assumed (Columbus Confusion again!), but mainly because they'd undergone what he calls a mystical opening or enlightenment-experience during the NDE.¹²

The fact that this can happen to millions of quite ordinary people all over the world has to be a major discovery indeed, with shattering implications for all our ideas about what the good life consists of, what "mental health" really is, indeed about every aspect of human affairs, including art, ethics, religion and even science itself. For example, I no longer need any evidence about flat lines or psychic perception to disabuse me of materialism; I'm actually experiencing the whole universe, moment by moment, as an event happening within an all-encompassing field of infinite consciousness, as it were, of which John's personality is just one focus. I'm still interested in the research on how consciousness relates to the brain, and whether personal consciousness continues after the brain dies, but for me now these are just special scientific questions amongst many others. As far as my personal life goes, eternity consciousness here is quite

enough for the moment, and life after the grave can take care of itself, if indeed “after” is even appropriate.

The mother of all questions as I now see it, which I hope will become a main future thrust for research in this field, is : Can this astonishing intensity and depth of consciousness be opened up without dicing with death (and without getting bogged down in the mystique and mystification that has so often surrounded mysticism in the past)? The hypothesis I'm working with myself at the moment, based on my own experience, is that eternity consciousness isn't something new for humanity, some higher stage of evolution as current jargon would put it, but simply the normal human condition, from which I was somehow blocked out for my first fifty-nine-odd years, condemning me to so-called ordinary human life which is actually something like a universal neurosis, as mystics have always asserted. I have no clues (and am not bothered to speculate) about what could have caused the blocking to occur for our species sometime before history began. But I think I do have a clue to what the block is, and I've found it from considering the implications of our new discovery that unlocking so often occurs at the close approach of death.

I believe something like *a hyperactivity of the individual survival-mechanism* gives the human being a much higher anxiety-level than other species appear to have. In particular, the natural fact that every individual life must come to an end in time, to make way for new life, becomes imbued with an existential terror which has been taken for granted throughout human history, though it's really highly unnatural. As a result, living becomes for our species a kind of obsession with the future, which allows the luminous depth of real consciousness-in-each-moment to go quite unnoticed, until death is so close that the survival-mechanism “switches off”, as it were, revealing the true intensity of life. Then when the body is resuscitated by medical intervention, the spell of hyperactive survival-anxiety is at least partially broken; eternity consciousness is never again completely lost (though it may get temporarily obscured from time to time), but survival-functioning along the line of time is actually more efficient than before, because it is no longer neurotic.

If this hypothesis is correct, then humanity's greatest need is to find less dramatic ways of breaking hyper-anxiety's spell; today, this could be the only way of saving us from extinction by your own anxiety-driven technologies. Perhaps NDE research itself has already begun moving

society in that desirable direction, by gradually changing the popular image of death from the Grim Reaper to the “Great Light at the Tunnel’s End.” Perhaps, again, some of the ancient mystical disciplines of mediation and the like were originally meant as spell-breakers, and can be rediscovered in the light of our knowledge from NDEs; their success-rate in the past hasn’t been exactly encouraging, but maybe we can do better now by using a scientific approach to out through traditional mystique and mystification¹³.

Or perhaps readers of this article can think of still other possibilities. Exploration of this issue is now my main life-concern until my UDE (Ultimate Death Experience) removes me from the planetary scene.

Meantime, whatever becomes of my particular hypotheses, the study of NDEs surely has to be the most exciting new frontier both for science and for humanity, offering the best hope we have for a real New Age.

NOTES

1. For an excellent overview of the whole subject, see Zaleski, C., *Other World Journeys: Accounts of Near-Death Experience in Medieval and Modern Times* (New York & Oxford, Oxford University Press 1987.)
2. Obtainable from Human Sciences Press, New York; the editor is Dr. Bruce Greyson, M.D., Dept of Psychiatry, University of Connecticut Health Centre, Farmington, CT 06030.
3. See Ring, K., *Life at Death*, (New York Coward McCann & Geoghegan, 1980) and Grey, M., *Return from Death*, (Condon, Arkana 1985).
4. Morse, M. with Paul Perry, *Closer to the Light*, (New York, Villard 1990).
5. See for example, Sabom, M.B., *Recollections of Death: A Medical Investigation*, (New York, Harper & Row 1982). Dr. Peter Fenwick of London’s Institute of psychiatry has recently announced a project for seeking really hard evidence in this area.
6. For a discussion of this point, see Zaleski, *op. cit.*, Chap 7.
7. See Jung’s autobiographical study, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, (New York, Vintage 1961), Chap. 10.
8. See Ring, K., *Heading Towards Omega; In Search of the Meaning of Near-Death Experiences*, (New York, Morrow 1984), and Sutherland, Cherie, *Transformed by the Light*, (Sydney Bantam 1992).
9. See Wren-Lewis, J., “The Darkness of God: A Personal Report on Consciousness Transformation through an Encounter with Death,” *J. Humanistic Psychology*, Vol 28, No. 2, 1988, p.105.
10. For the modern scientific assessment of how dreams relate either literally or symbolically to unfinished emotional business in waking life, see Faraday, A., *The Dream Game*, (New York, Harger & Row 1984).
11. As long-standing readers of theological literature may be aware, my anti-mystical writings played a major part in inspiring Bishop John A.T. Robinson’s *Honest go God*, (London, SCM 1963).

My detailed analysis of mysticism as a form of neurosis was published under the title "Love's Coming-of-Age" in Rycroft, C. (Ed.), *Psychoanalysis Observed*, (London, Constable 1966) and in my book *What Shall we Tell the Children?* (London, Constable 1971).

12. See Ring, *Heading towards Omega*, ref. 8 above.

13. See Wren-Lewis, J., "A Reluctant Mystic," *Self and Society*, (U.K.) Vol. XXIX, No 2, 1991, p.4.