

Cosmologias Alternativas e Estados Alterados

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Editor’s Note: In Western societies, the dominant paradigm presents a cosmology in which humans, as biological matter, live and die in a universe governed by the laws of physics. In this worldview, there is no room for the possibility of life after death, and different states of consciousness have significance only as pathological deviations from that worldview.



In sharp contrast, the cosmologies of other cultures—ancient and contemporary pre-industrial—have taken for granted the existence of an afterlife. For them, dying is a meaningful part of life, and death is a journey for which the individual can and should prepare. To aid in this, many cultures throughout history have developed experiential “technologies” — techniques and practices intended to train initiates in the art and science of dying and postmortem survival. These experiential “technologies” invariably involve training in altered or non-ordinary states of consciousness throughout the individual’s lifetime.

This fundamental difference between Western and pre-industrial cosmologies and their respective end-of-life technologies has profound consequences for how societies view living, dying, death, and non-ordinary states of consciousness. In this article, psychiatrist Stanislav Grof explores some of the key elements in pre-industrial cosmologies and their emphasis on transformative “technologies” for training in altered states throughout the individual’s lifetime.

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 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 it is described as encounters with various archetypal beings, or as moving through a sequence of non-ordinary states of consciousness (NOSC). In some cultures they believe 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.

Reincarnation. Many cultures have independently developed a belief system in reincarnation that includes return of the unit of consciousness to another physical lifetime on Earth. The concept of karma and reincarnation represents a cornerstone of Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, Zoroastrianism, the Tibetan Vajrayana Buddhism, and Taoism. Similar ideas can be found in such geographically, historically, and culturally diverse groups as various African tribes, American Indians, pre-Columbian cultures, the Polynesian kahunas, practitioners of the Brazilian Umbanda, the Gauls, and the Druids. In ancient Greece, several important schools of thought subscribed to it; among these were the Pythagoreans, the Orphics, and the Platonists. This doctrine was also adopted by the Essenes, the Pharisees, the Karaites, and other Jewish and semi-Jewish groups, and it formed an important part of the kabbalistic theology of medieval Jewry. It was also held by the Neoplatonists and Gnostics.

Maps for the soul’s journey. 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 would be prudent, then, to prepare for this time by systematic practice during our lifetime.

Death as part of life. Another important 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.

Experiential Training

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.

Shamanism. 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 Paleolithic era. 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 a 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.

Rites of passage. 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, marriage, and dying. They employ powerful mind-altering technologies and the experiences induced by them revolve around the triad 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)¹ has helped us to understand these events and appreciate their importance for individuals and human groups.

Ancient mysteries. 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 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.²

Sacred technologies. Of particular interest for transpersonally oriented researchers is the sacred literature of the various mystical traditions and the great spiritual philosophies of the East. Here belong the various systems of yoga, the theory and practice of Buddhism, Taoism, the Tibetan Vajrayana, Sufism, Christian mysticism, the Kabbalah, and many others. These systems developed effective forms of prayer, meditation, movement meditation, breathing exercise, and other powerful techniques for inducing NOSC with profound 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.

Ancient books of the dead. 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 exact nature of the procedures used by the ancient spiritual systems to induce these states remains an unexplored area.

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 such as Raymond Moody,³ Kenneth Ring,⁴ Michael Sabom,⁵ Bruce Greyson and Charles Flynn ⁶ 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.⁷ 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 fundamental 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.

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 all conscious activity. 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 commitment to the existing paradigm (held by many mainstream scientists) is an attitude well known from fundamentalist religions. Unlike scientism, science in the true sense of the word is open to unbiased investigation of any existing phenomena. With this in mind, we can divide the 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.

Challenging Conventional Concepts

The work with NOSC has generated a vast body of evidence that forms 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.

Transcending space and time. In transpersonal experiences, it is possible to transcend the usual limitations of the bodyego, 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.

Archetypal domains. In addition, transpersonal experiences can take us into the archetypal domains of the collective unconscious and mediate encounters 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.

Theta consciousness. 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.

Field of consciousness. 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 to 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. Challenging the basic metaphysical assumptions of Cartesian-Newtonian thinking, scientists like Rupert Sheldrake⁸ seriously explore such possibilities as “memory without a material substrate” and “morphogenetic fields”.

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 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.

A Look at the Data

Researchers have reported a variety of interesting phenomena which challenge conventional notions of death and survival. These fall into two broad categories: 1) phenomena on the threshold of death and 2) past-life experiences.

1. Phenomena on the Threshold of Death

Apparitions. Numerous visions of people who had just died have been 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 people within a twelve-hour period.⁹

Unexplained events. 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 off the wall, that seem to announce a person’s death.¹⁰

Death-bed visions. Individuals approaching death often experience encounters with their dead relatives who seem to welcome them to the next world. These deathbed visions are 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.

Near-death experiences. 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,³ Kenneth Ring,⁴ Michael Sabom,⁵ Bruce Greyson,⁶ 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.

Psychedelic therapies. 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 (for example, 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.¹¹

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. 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 OOBES. Naturally, people who have had an OOBES might have come close to death, but they 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.

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 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 extremely rich and extraordinary.¹⁴ Careful study of the amassed evidence is absolutely necessary to make any valid conclusions in this area. As we will discuss later, the beliefs concerning the issue of reincarnation have great ethical impact on human life and our relationship to the world.

Past-life memories in children. Many instances exist of small children who seem to remember and describe 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. Cases like these have been described by child psychiatrists. 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, has conducted meticulous studies of more than three thousand such cases (see his books *Twenty Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation*, *Unlearned Language*, and *Children Who Remember Previous Lives*¹⁵), reporting only those that met his high research standards.

Birthmarks. 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. 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 the USA. His research meets high standards and received considerable esteem. In 1977, the *Journal of Nervous and Mental Diseases* devoted almost an entire issue to this subject and the work was reviewed in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*.

Past-life memories in adults. Spontaneous vivid reliving of past-life memories occurs most frequently during spontaneous episodes of NOSC (which may be classed as 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.

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.¹⁶

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 ordinary channels.
2. In some instances, the accuracy of these memories can be objectively verified, sometimes with remarkable 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 inexplicable 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. However, I have

myself observed and published several remarkable cases, where most unusual aspects of such experiences could be verified by independent historical research.¹⁷

Implications of the Research

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 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.

Besides their theoretical relevance, the issues discussed in this article have great practical significance. I have explored at some length in other publications^{16,17} 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 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, it 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 postmortem consequences of one’s deeds would be “a boon to the wicked”. Modern authors such as Alan Harrington¹⁸ and Ernest Becker¹⁹ 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.¹⁷

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 brought on by the dominance of the Western mechanistic paradigm.

— S. G.

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