

Beyond Death: Transition and the Afterlife

Roger J. Woolger

He who dies before he dies, does not die when he dies
Abraham of Santa Clara.

Zen has no other secrets than seriously thinking about birth and death
Takeda Shingen

We are not dealing here with irreality. The *mundus imaginalis* is a world
of autonomous forms and images...It is a perfectly real world preserving all
the richness and diversity of the sensible world but in a spiritual state
Henry Corbin

By way of introduction I should say that I am a psychotherapist trained in Jungian psychoanalysis and various other modalities and that my current practice uses what is called “regression” to early childhood, past life, interlife and other transpersonal or “spiritual” experiences. (In other contexts—see below—the word “regression” can equally refer to what shamans call “journeying”) But I also hold degrees in the comparative phenomenology of religion, a subject that greatly illuminates the kind of areas which we are here today calling “beyond death.”

Our starting point today has been the, by now, quite extensive documentation of so-called Near Death Experiences (NDEs); you have heard the detailed reports discussed by Dr Fenwick and Dr. Powell’s reflections on similar experiences. It will already seem apparent that the scientific paradigm that seeks to fully explain these phenomena in materialistic terms is stretched beyond its limits. Not long ago I saw a tape of a major British television program where a woman suffered a clinical NDE during an operation and reported, while “out of her body” seeing an instrument in the operating room she could not possibly have seen while in her body and alive. Interesting and provocative as the discussion was, it was entirely limited to interviewing medical staff; no informed authorities on parapsychology (except a materialist sceptic), spiritualism, religious phenomena or metaphysics, specialists in thanatology, or experts from religious traditions were interviewed. Later I was told this is a policy decision of the television company! It was like a political discussion where only one party is invited to participate.

What I want to show is that there is a vast amount of information about the phenomena of death, transition and “otherworlds” available to us that is much more sophisticated than most people realize. Not just the widely known studies of Kenneth Ring and Raymond Moody on actual Near Death Experiences, but detailed cross cultural comparisons of how different cultures experience and envision the afterlife, reports from shamans of “journeys” to the spirit realms, or realms of the dead, elaborate accounts of the soul’s post-mortem encounters and movements from the Tibetan

Buddhist and Indian traditions, as well as from my own field, past life regression, where thousands of accounts of death transition phenomena have been recorded. Two important and influential recent books I would mention especially are *Otherworldly Journeys* by Carol Zaleski and Sogyal Rinpoche's *Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*. Zaleski, a Harvard trained historian of religion, compared medieval and other accounts of post-mortem journeys of the soul with the contemporary literature of NDEs and showed compellingly that visions of the afterlife are based on experience not speculation. Sogyal's book demystifies the obscure symbolic language of the ancient text called the Bardo Thodol (translated usually as *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*). He shows clearly how the Tibetan "wake" or post-mortem prayers to the deceased person are actually addressed to that person's disembodied consciousness to help him or her navigate through confusing or frightening visions created by his/her own consciousness—a consciousness that goes beyond the body eventually towards further incarnations.

The first and most important observation to be made from these two books and the many that they have inspired is that experience beyond the body, either before or after death are of a much greater order and significance than mere energetic discharges and "hallucinations" generated by the brain—a claim that appears increasingly trivial and narrow in its reductionism when evaluated from a religious phenomenological perspective. The disembodied consciousness in these many reports actually encounters other realms, other dimensions, other beings and other states of being. These states include mystical, expanded and often "cosmic" consciousness commensurate with those described in classic texts like R. M. Bucke's *Cosmic Consciousness* and William James' *Varieties of Religious Experience*. This is further underlined by a more recent work, *Dreamtime and Inner Space* by cultural anthropologist Holger Kahlweit. Kahlweit writes that "as far as I am concerned there is no difference between a near death experience and an out-of-body experience". For him they both are versions of the encounter with "other" or "higher" dimensions" described by shamanic practitioners as "journeying".

Because of the split and downright antagonism that often exists between those trained in science and those professing particular religions there is often little study of each other's accounts of religious and psychical phenomena, so books like those mentioned are often not known outside a narrow circle of experts or academic authorities. Yet it is worth noting that Carol Zaleski's book has already spawned a whole academic field of research into the phenomenology of "otherworldly realities"—there have been several international conferences to date—while Sogyal's book is now used world-wide to help people who are nearing death prepare for their passing over.

My first realization of how important it is to follow a person's consciousness into other realms, in whatever way possible, came when during a psychotherapy session some twenty years ago with a woman who had survived a major car-accident and had gone through a classic NDE during subsequent surgery to save her life. She was still suffering from manifest PTSD symptoms when she consulted me and I decided to regress her to the memory of the accident. Not only did she relive the accident and release much buried trauma held in her body but she also proceeded to re-play the experience of

watching herself from above as ambulance men pulled her body from the wreckage. She then saw her body taken to the hospital and undergoing surgery. Next she felt herself drifting up to a higher realm and meeting with beings of light whom she recognised as deceased members of her family and who told her that her work on earth was not finished and that she must return. She remembered the pain of coming back in to her body. Prior to the regression she had not “remembered” any of this. The session profoundly altered her attitude to death and dying. Indeed what most deeply struck her was *the continuity of her consciousness both before and after her “death” and both in and out of her body*. Later I was to be reminded of this when reading Sogyal’s remark that “birth and death are all in the mind and nowhere else”.

I have deliberately avoided using any one received picture of other dimensions whether Tibetan Buddhist, Christian, spiritualist, shamanic or other in trying to understand and classify the NDE experiences of my clients, those reported in the clinical literature and my own personal “journeys” into “other realms.” My approach has rather been simply to collect and compare these different descriptions and claims in the spirit of data gathering avoiding rigid or exclusive systems of classification. This is traditionally how the science of religion proceeds: it uses the phenomenological principle of reserving judgement as to the ontological status (i.e. which realm of reality) an experience actually belongs to and simply puts [brackets] or “parentheses” around the descriptive terms to indicate that it is too soon to decide upon what kind of reality to attribute to it. This way we can make comparisons and tentative attempts to fit it into difference schemas. For example: is a vision of a “demon” a projection of a person’s personal unconscious or a transpersonal denizen of an “otherworld” or “hell”? In other words does this psychic entity that has a “demonic” appearance have an autonomous existence or ontology of its own? We cannot know for sure without addressing all kinds of questions about its origins, context and behaviour. Taking a tentative approach like this avoids what biologist Sir Peter Medawar once called the arrogance of “nothing buttery”—it’s *nothing but* imagination, it’s *nothing but* a hallucination, it’s *nothing but* the misfiring of a neural circuit. Reductionism of this kind rarely ventures out of the prison of the closed mind I regret to say.

Once we start to study, reports of NDEs, mystical journeys of “the alone to the Alone” (Plotinus), past life reports of meeting higher guides between lives or shamanic accounts of journeys to the Land of the Dead, etc. with the open minded attitude of phenomenology numerous questions start to present themselves, not the least of which is whether these states and beings are “real”, which is to raise the issue of their ontology. We also find we have to look carefully at our language, which now seems to be booby-trapped with what may be symbols, codes or slippery metaphors. What does “beyond” the body or “beyond” death mean? Is this a spatial picture of another place? How can it be a place if it is not physical? Does that make such a word usage metaphorical? Is it a symbol? If so, then a symbol of what? Here we might consider the tantalizing little dictum of a Sufi master, Al Ghazzali:

The visible world was made to correspond to the world invisible and there is nothing in this world but is a symbol of something in that other world.

The fact is that one of the first assertions that almost all visionaries, mystics, journeyers and NDE survivors make is that their visions are without question of *actual existent places or worlds*, indeed places or worlds that are manifestly of a non-physical order. It is here that the terminology of “other” or “invisible” or “higher” worlds seems inescapable in describing such experiences. To summarize their claims we have to say that they are positing a referent that is non-physical and yet real. This upsets the Materialist, for whom there is only one reality, namely this one, and at this point he/she must either withdraw from the game or recognize that the greatest minds in the Western tradition have had to face this issue and forgo their assumptions of one-dimensional reality. When Aristotle, following his master, Plato, tried to summarize the knowledge of his day, he was obliged, after writing the *Physics*, to add another volume, “beyond” (*meta*) the realm of physics, which in Greek became the *Metaphysics*. Plato had already designated a *metaxy* or intermediary world of subtle spiritual forms that were not physical. Indeed, according to the eminent Indian scholar Ananda K. Coomeraswamy, Plato had already been influenced by the teachings of ancient India, for we find Plato’s idea clearly expressed in the Hindu Upanishads as follows:

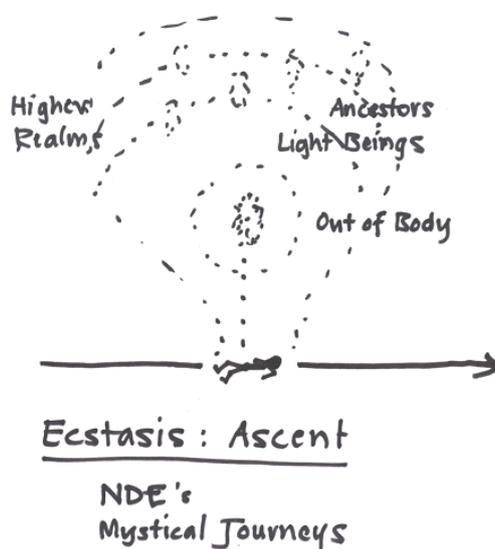
There are two states for man—the state in this world and the state in the next; there is also a third state, the state intermediate between these two, which can be likened to the dream [state]. While in the intermediate state a man experiences both the other states, that of this world and that in the next; and the manner whereof is as follows: when he dies he lives only in the subtle body, on which are left the impressions [*samskaras*, Skt] of his past deeds, and of those impressions is he aware, illumined as they are by the light of the Transcendent Self [*atman*, Skt]...

Brihadaranyaka Upanishad

This transcendent or intermediary world has been noticed in almost all cultures and traditions in one form or another. Buddhists from Tibet talk of the *bardo* realm in which many states of the spirit/soul, i.e. *bardos*, exist between lifetimes on earth. The Spiritualists in their teachings call it the Spirit World, following the great visionary Swedenborg who reported visiting its many dimensions. In his terminology, its “heavens” and “hells” were “states” corresponding to different post-mortem spiritual and moral conditions. (Swedenborg’s work has so many parallels with Mahayana Buddhism that it led the Zen master D. T. Suzuki, to call him “the Buddha of the West”). In Celtic tradition the intermediary realm is often called the Middle Kingdom or the Faery World. Australian aborigine’s call it the Dreamtime, the Sufis of Persia called it the *alam al-mithal* or Mythic World, which Henry Corbin has dubbed the *mundus imaginalis*.) Jung called it the collective unconscious, though this term tends to be grossly misunderstood. A good survey of depictions of the “otherworld” (Zaleski’s term) from many cultures is to be found in Suki Miller’s *After Death: How People around the World Map the Journey after Death*.

In surveying reports of such journeys in the world religions and innumerable tribal practices Miller and other scholars such as Mircea Eliade have described a common pattern of “ascent”, which is to say an ecstatic (from Latin: *ex-stasis*), mystical or out-of-body experience wherein the spiritual traveller leaves the physical body and travels in

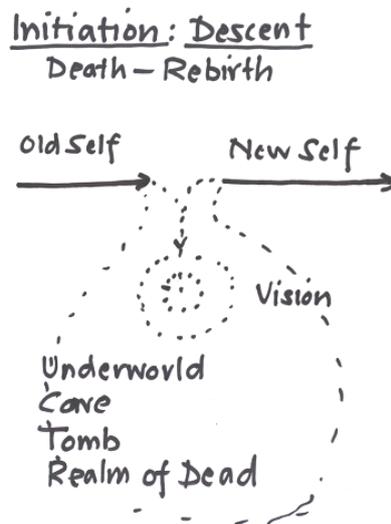
his/her subtle body (or dreambody or astral body) into “higher” realms (“higher” because they are of a higher or non-physical vibration, not literally higher.) Here it is common to meet beings of light, ancestors, the Dead etc, exactly as in NDEs. Here is a diagram of this:



For reasons too complex to discuss here, we in the West have mostly lost touch with these “other” or intermediary worlds. The Christian churches only pay them lip service or retail simplistic formulae they don’t understand. It is naively thought that we “go somewhere” after death, though descriptions of how and where are mostly stereotypical and ignorant. If there was once a widespread shamanic or spiritual tradition enabling contact with higher realities and the spirit realms in the West it was lost long ago. Some say it disappeared when the Roman Church threw out the Gnostics and the Mystery Schools. Others maintain that in persecuting “witches” in the Middle Ages the Catholic Church successfully suppressed the last folk remnants of indigenous shamanic tradition in Europe. Fortunately today more and more ministers and priests are taking note of NDE reports and working directly with the realities of “spirit” in transition as Beamont’s work eminently shows.

In the ancient world the Mystery traditions focused on the stories of divinities such as the Demeter/Persephone, Isis/Osiris, Cybele/Attis diads, or on Mithras or on Dionysus, all of which depict in their stories a momentous death and re-birth through the archetype of the Cosmic Mother. Much was made of these sacred cosmic dramas as models of and as preparations for an individual’s eventual death and transition. In fact it seems that the initiates were given a kind of rehearsal of their death by being taken to a dark place—usually a cave or underground chamber—that symbolized the realm of the dead or the womb of the Great Mother. In the darkness of the mystery the old self died and a new

self was reborn with the secret knowledge that it had a spirit or subtle body that was immortal. “He who has seen the Mysteries will not taste death” said one initiate.



The diagram gives a partly symbolic picture of what the initiate into the Mysteries very likely experienced. The ritual “entombment” vouchsafed for him or her a vision of the “otherworld” into which he/she would be reborn. Aeneas’ famous descent to visit the Shade of his father Anchises with the Golden Bough at Nemi is a reference to the Mystery of crossing the River Styx (situated not far from Nemi) as a transition into the spirit world. Such “descents” into the Underworld were no doubt preparatory for a hierophany, or showing of the divine in the form of an ex-stasis (i.e. ecstasy), an out of body experience or “ascent” that enabled an encounter with the transcendent realm of divine being. Hence the famous saying of Heraklitos, “The way up and the way down are one and the same”.

The intermediary or “otherworld” is multidimensional and is inhabited by a vast range of differing types of beings in subtle form, ranging from angels to demons. Perhaps the most commonly encountered spirits are those of our own ancestors but there are reports of meeting every form of human spirit being from highly elevated masters, Gods and demi-gods to degenerated sub-human and monstrous forms. Many of these spirits live in clusters, communities, realms or domains of like resonance, held together by ancestral ties, spiritual commonalities, allegiances, or else similarities of karma, whether good or bad. Some realms are elevated and radiant with light, some dark and hellish. Animals spirits abound in their own realms and every kind of paradisaal or hellish landscape may exist, according to the state of being it mirrors for those souls who have condemned or willed themselves to be there (this is Swedenborg’s teaching).

The reports of NDEs collected by Moody and others show again and again that the disembodied consciousness meets “beings of light” on the “other side” we are calling the intermediary realm. These are frequently ancestors, recently deceased family members who often counsel them and reassure them that their sufferings are over or else, like my client, counsel them that they still have important work to do on earth. How far these encounters are determined by the beliefs and expectations of those who

have “died” has not yet been fully explored, but our knowledge from NDEs is amplified by thousands of past life reports of dying in a previous life and making a similar journey. My own findings and those of colleagues suggest that encounters with ancestors, while being very common are by no means universal. We have also observed thousands of past lives of warriors on battlefields and seen them re-group in the spirit world not with their families so much as with their bands of comrades or councils of warrior elders that they knew on earth. Members of religious communities are more likely to meet with their fellow monks, nuns or sacerdotal communities or with teachers or gurus than return to their spirit ancestors. Of course NDEs report numerous encounters with “guides” or wise beings of light, which is confirmed by past life therapy. Souls who died in some rebellion or were identified with some cause or movement will re-align with their leaders.

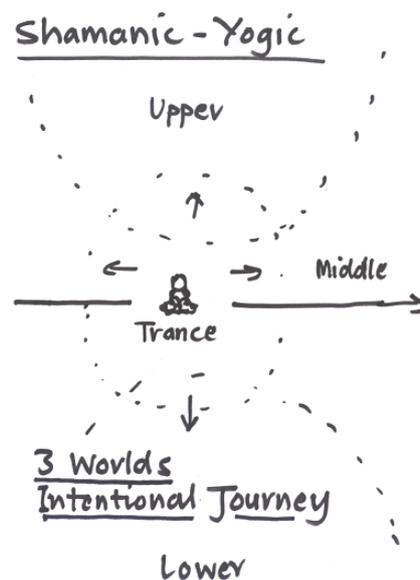
The practical importance of these findings, especially for those counselling the bereaved and working with those approaching death is enormous. If only based upon report and not absolute ontological certainty, the overwhelming majority of these reports is that there *is* a world of light or a subtle world beyond this, that in many ways it is a continuity or an extension of this one, but in a non-physical form, and that in it we will encounter beings in their spiritual form usually of a loving and wise nature. We know that this other world has many dimensions (“many mansions” was Jesus’ phrase; the Buddhists talk of *bardos*) corresponding to one’s state of spiritual attainment on the earth high or low. Great souls who have journeyed many times and in many lifetimes into and through these realms sometimes leave us their conspectus, their overview *sub specie aeternitatis*. The works of Plotinus are an example of this in the West. Here is the Buddha’s report:

With the heavenly eye, purified and beyond range of human vision, I saw how beings vanish and come to be again. I saw high and low, brilliant and insignificant, and how each obtained according to his karma, a favourable or painful rebirth.

It is only rare souls that attain the clarity of the Buddha, being able to open their “heavenly eye” (this seems to be a kind of higher consciousness reported by many spiritual voyagers. Compare “the light of Atman or Transcendent Self” quoted in the Hindu Upanishad earlier). Nevertheless many today who practice shamanic “journeying” report the development of clairvoyant powers such as the ability to see other dimensions or realities or to perceive “other lives” and “spirits” in people’s auras as well as, in some cases, learning to call spirit beings at will. The great authority on shamanism Mircea Eliade, called shamans “technicians of the sacred” because of their ability to travel—out of body, ecstatically (= *ex-stasis*), of course—between the worlds, mediating and rebalancing the intercourse between the living and the dead.

Because of their facility in travelling through and between these “otherworlds” shamans describe quite sophisticated pictures of the spiritual geography they encounter; this is also true of yogis and great spiritual masters like the Buddha with whom they share these powers. Such voyagers tell, when they move between the various inner worlds or *bardos*, of dark and light forces, of hierarchies or different planes of heavens and hells,

of. It is in fact their job to navigate what Kahlweit calls “inner space”, so as to discriminate between hostile or malevolent “spirit” beings and to bring back souls who have either become lost or captive to these destructive powers or more often just stuck in their own negativity or despair. The shaman thus journeys intentionally to various upper or lower realms, deliberately using powers or “allies” from spirits realms to strengthen and help him. Here we hear echoes of the old hero journeys of myth and legend where the spiritual hero (Moses, St John the Divine) may either climb the sacred mountain to receive teachings or descend into hell (Jesus, Aeneas, Dante, Avatars, Bodhisattvas) to encounter or rescue souls that are lost (see Joseph Campbell. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*).



In my own practice of regressing clients and students to lost childhood memories, to buried traumas, as well as to their many past lives I have been greatly helped by the cosmographies of the shamans, yogis and the heroes of myth. Their maps of “inner space” have proved invaluable aids in navigating to and from various “otherworld” realities. The journeys I accompany my clients on are not only between physical and psycho-spiritual realms (as, for example, in out-of-body or dissociative reactions to trauma, accidents, NDEs etc) but also include the supreme transition from dying in the body to the “afterlife” realms beyond death. In guiding clients through “past life” realities the re-experiencing of a “past life” death is more often than not the most important part of the journey to be navigated since it may require the release of quite complex psychic or “karmic” imprints such as fear, shame, guilt, grief etc (see Woolger, *Other Lives, Other Selves*).

In working with the post-mortem states the soul inherited from “past lives” I have found the Mahayana Buddhist classification of three realms of Being extremely helpful. in locating, rescuing and re-locating lost “soul fragments” (as many writers now call them.) The three “bodies” (*kayas*) or cosmic realms of the Buddha, refer to

1. the *highest realm* of Pure Light (*Amitabha-buddha* or *Dharmakaya*),

2. the *intermediary realm* of subtle “spirit” forms in all their polarities (heavens, hells etc) which we have already described (*Samboghakaya*), and
3. the *Earth plane* or realm of physical or material reality i.e. “this” world (*Nirmanakaya*) (See further Woolger, *The Presence of Other Worlds*). This is how they present themselves hierarchically:



These different realms or post-mortem “states” we encounter in the past-life journey beyond death help explain how souls or soul fragments frequently get “lost” or “trapped” in different kinds of psychic “limbos”. Many report for example, after leaving their “past life body” in a violent death (murder, massacre, catastrophe) that their “past life” consciousness (warrior, refugee, victim) cannot leave the earth but wanders looking for comrades, lost children, family or other villagers. These wandering soul fragments resemble traditional ghosts, who are, like Hamlet’s father, “doomed a certain time to walk the earth.” Such “spirits” who are trapped on the Earth plane are traditionally called “wandering ghosts” in the East. They are also to be found in and around the auras of living human beings, the phenomenon we now call “spirit attachment” (see earlier Newsletter of the RCP).

We usually find that these spirits—truly “lost souls”—are in severe post-traumatic shock, unaware they are dead and thus unprepared to “ascend” into “higher” realms of Light or to be welcomed “home” by the ancestral spirits. The intervention of the therapist or the shaman can “awaken” these soul fragments from their self-perpetuating limbos and re-align them with “higher” realms where they find peace and rest or where they can happily re-connect with lost loves or other ancestors, much as in classic NDEs.

The second or Intermediary realm is where we find souls trapped not so much on the earth or around persons but stuck in imaginal “hells” or states of severe confusion of their own making. As Swedenborg and more recently Sogyal Rinpoche have observed,

the psychic apparatus or “mental body” of a person after death tends to perpetuate whatever state of mind he/she was in before dying. If the dying person in their “past life” dies in despair and loneliness he/she will experience him/herself after death in an exactly similar space of despair or loneliness. This state, similar to that of the attached earthbound spirit, prevents it “ascending” to happier realms of light or of even being aware of the loving spirit presences that are around it, willing to help and heal. The states—fear, grief, rage at injustice, hatefulness, self-loathing, pride, guilt, sense of failure, resignation etc—are psychological states of “hell” in which the old complexes from the previous life on earth are perpetually and compulsively re-rerun psychically like repeating tape loops, resulting in them being even more deeply imprinted. Hence the need, according to the Tibetan Buddhists, to counsel the soul after death so that it can let go of its earthly obsessions and experience the joy of deliverance into “the Light” (Amitabha-buddha). If they are not released by prayer, intervention from “higher planes” or self-awareness (which is by no means easy in this “compulsive” state) these “karmic complexes” as I have called them elsewhere, will re-cycle and become the unconsciously inherited psychic patterns (guilt, low self-esteem, compulsiveness, anxiety, depression etc) which will plague future “incarnations” which is to say other states of being. This is symbolically “the wheel of re-birth” in Eastern teaching. Some of Shakespeare’s final words summarize this theme:

And my ending is despair
Unless I be relieved by prayer,
Which pierceth so that it assault
Heaven itself and frees all fault

The Tempest, Act V, Epilogue

Nearly all voyagers in the inner realms, whether in shamanism, meditation or past life regression have encountered beings of light, whether they call them the ancestors, the Old Ones, angels, Wise Ones or simply the eternal archetypes. These entities belong to the third or “highest” plane of Pure Light, a mystical light of dazzling beauty that pervades and illuminates all Being. Encounter with this Light, as many of the more elaborate NDE reports attest, can lead to a total transformation of the personality. (For one of the most compelling NDE descriptions at this level ever recorded I recommend Mellen-Thomas Benedict’s *Through the Light*). When it occurs in past life regression it usually marks a phase of the re-alignment of the psyche with its spiritual dimension and the opening of what Jung would call the process of individuation. Others have called this self-realization or self-actualization. It is the end point of the mystical journey of the soul. In Dante’s vision of this realm, in the *Paradiso* the supernal light or “the prime mover” is described as “the love which moves the sun and all the other stars”—*l’amor che muove il sole e gli altri stelle*.