

Death, Transition and the Spirit Realms: Insights from Past-Life Therapy and Tibetan Buddhism

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(Based on a lecture given at the 1998 Conference of the Association of Humanistic Psychology (Britain), in Grantham, Lincolnshire. A shorter version was published in *Self and Society*, Spring, 1999.)

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

He who does not become an expert in annihilation shall not discover the beautiful face of the bride
Abu 'l'Mawahib ash-Shadili

Death is a drawing together of two worlds, not an end. We are the bridge
C. G. Jung (1875-1961)

In recent times there has been a renewed interest in ways of looking at death, transition and significantly rebirth. In hospitals the work of Elizabeth Kubler-Ross and the Hospice Movement has humanized the experience of death. The remarkable writings about near death experiences of Raymond Moody and Ken Ring in America are widely known and in many ways they have changed consciousness of what death and transition might be about.

To amplify this picture, there have been some extremely valuable works on the death transition by Buddhist teachers in the west, notably Sogyal Rinpoche. His commentary, *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*, is a superb modern amplification of the archaic symbolic material of the famous *Tibetan Book of the Dead* that fascinated Jung a generation ago. In addition, our growing appreciation of the phenomenon of shamanic journeying has led to the phenomenological discussion of both near death experiences and actual death experiences as types of out of body or "other worldly" experiences. German anthropologist Holger Kahlweit has even stated in his book *Dreamtime and Inner Space*, "As far as I am concerned, an out of body experience is identical with a near death experience." My own findings from past life regression therapy fully agree with this and in fact add a huge amount of detail to both shamanic and Tibetan studies. This is what I want to sketch in what follows.

When we look at the literature of near death experiences we get the common picture of a series of stages. In the first stage someone who has clinically died in a car accident or on the operating table often finds him or herself out of the body as a spectator watching the scene from an elevated vantage point. People often report travelling through darkness, outer space, a void and often a tunnel. When they go into this other space they meet with relatives, friends and sometimes god-like or angelic presences. In this elevated state in this other place they find themselves looking back over all the deeds of their lives, rather like the cliché of the drowning man whose life flashes before him. Part of the experience on the other side is an immersion in the feeling of light and love. All kinds of deep understandings and emotional experiences become fused; there is a profound sense of well being and any fear of death from pain that they had previously are dissolved.

I have worked with a number of people who have clinically died in this lifetime then returned to earth. They usually remember it as a decision, and often the common element is that in the out of body state they are shown the beings on earth that they are connected with. Then they are shown the ancestors or the spirits of members of family who have already died and they are asked to make a choice of who they want be with. I remember one case where a woman with a one-year-old son had aphasia from a pulmonary embolism and died on the operating table. The infection had actually been caused by an abortion, which she had earlier. She saw the spirit of the dead child in the other world and she also saw the one-year-old son on the earth. A guide told her she would have to choose whether she wanted to be with the living or the dead. She chose to come back to earth to be with her one-year-old son.

When newly dead individuals choose to come back into the body, their attitudes to life and death have changed radically and forever. They often express a much deeper faith and are much more open and loving; they have a profound sense of life in a way that they did not before. The return is not always blissful. It is sometimes painful, sometimes they came back reluctantly, they made choice and yet it was very difficult for

them and the adjustment took in some cases many years to make. The Tibetan viewpoint is that this after death realm (which they call a bardo, a place in between lifetimes) is real. They teach that when the spirit leaves the body it spends a time in this intermediary realm and goes through a series of experiences that are partly to do with letting go of the lifetime that has passed and partly preparing it, ideally for leaving the earth plane altogether. More commonly it is faced with beings, entities, energies that are problematic and in many ways mirror the unfinished psychological problems of the person who has died. Unless the dying consciousness can assimilate or in some sense encounter these difficult forces that they meet, they will be reborn and sent back to earth. What is extraordinary about the Tibetan writings is the way in which the consciousness after death is treated as a fully human consciousness essentially no different from what it was on earth in a body. Sogyal Rinpoche makes the remarkable statement that, "Tibetan Buddhism has left us the still revolutionary insight that birth and death are both in the mind and nowhere else." Ultimately there is a continuity of mind whether you are in a body or out of a body.

There is a tendency even in Jungian literature to dismiss such descriptions as just mythology. As far as I am concerned these are real experiences, not some kind of hallucination or imaginary event. The whole psychology of imagination needs to be revised in the light of these experiences. I agree with Kenneth Ring that in an out of body state we have more refined or subtle senses, which belong to what I prefer to call the spiritual imagination.

If indeed consciousness or the soul or the subtle body somehow continues after the physical death of the being, then this opens the whole question of where does it go to, how many realms, other levels or "heavens" in traditional terms may it pass through? What are the rules? What are the guidelines? How does the consciousness that has left the physical plane progress? How does it get stuck? What sends it into lower realms, hellish spaces and so on? So all the questions that had been part of quaint old-fashioned Christian theology and other religious beliefs suddenly take on a new meaning as psychologically real, largely as a result of the testimony of people who have clinically died and others regressed to such places in past lives.

Birth and death are part of a profound continuous cycle. As the foetus gets closer to the moment of birth and the compression that takes place within the uterus gets stronger, dark and painful memories of dismemberment, violent death, crucifixion, burning, crushing all kinds of horrible death memories are stimulated. The birth canal itself is a mirror image of the tunnel that the soul leaves through when it leaves the body. Coming back into the body is a reverse tunnel and a painful one. In my book, *Other Lives, Other Selves*, I have suggested that there is a kind of a loop that we go through. The way we come in is often a mirror of how we have died in previous lifetimes. To take the simplest example: a person who is born with the umbilical cord around the neck, when regressed spontaneously remembers how in a previous lifetime he was hanged.

Astrologers have always said that we are born with a psychic template that will emerge over the years. This certainly is confirmed by regression work which shows that we are born with all kinds of psychic residues from the previous history of our culture, if not mankind. Just as we may have physical deformities built into our genes, we have psychic deformities and issues built into our psychic structure. In Hindu and Buddhist terminology these formations that come in at birth and are already being rehearsed before birth are called *samskaras* or karmic residues of previous trauma. These psychic impressions carry with them the emotional weight of certain memories and associations as well as fragments of personality, attitudes, feelings, obsessions and so on.

Past life therapy is a trauma-based therapy where we are looking for traumas in other lifetimes that may have caused psychic shutdowns and hence complexes of one kind or another. Phobias for example derive from residual fears of certain physically dangerous past life situations. Fear of knives, fear of fire, fear of closed spaces, fear of isolation, fear of abandonment all may have past life stories attached to them. Our fear of fire may have to do with being burned to death. Our fear of knives may have to do with being cut up in some way, attacked in battles and so on. Fears of failure may have to do with times when we've held positions of responsibility and let people down.

Some years ago, following an important hint from *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, I started during regression work, to look very carefully at what people were going through at the moment that they were dying in a past life. I found that the death experience and the way people clung to death or died with despairing thoughts had a huge amount to say about their general attitudes to life in their current lives.

Typical thoughts that have come out of regressions at the moment of death -- ...*they didn't want me*, ...*they abandoned me*, - these are children who have been put out to die abandoned, lost in some kind of attack, and

so on. *...I've had to do it all alone*, say people who are left to struggle or die alone. People who died in a famine say that there wasn't enough, there was never enough. People who are killed for speaking out or saying something they shouldn't have done say: *...I should have kept silent, ...I should have kept it to myself*. Others are guilty that *...I could have done more, ...it's all my fault, ...I didn't do enough*. Vengeful thoughts include *...I'll get back at them*, or there may be negative thoughts about the self: *...I'm hopeless, ...it's useless,* "*...I'm disgusting, or ...I'll never be able to do this again, ...I'll never walk again, ...I'm trapped, ...I'll never get out of this*. Following betrayals some say: *...it's not safe to show what I really feel, ...people will let you down, ...it's all hopeless*. Such thoughts arise in past life sessions where people have remembered dying in despair or hopeless situations.

When consciousness leaves the physical body at death it takes with it another kind of body, often called the subtle or energy body, and imprinted on that energy body are all the memories from that lifetime, but particularly the impressions of trauma. In fact, all psychological and emotional states as well as physical memories are somehow imprinted in this energy sheath and this is what is carried over after death. Therefore, the Tibetans emphasize the importance of clear dying, i.e. dying in an open state of mind and as far as possible releasing and letting go of all the bad feelings that had accumulated at the end of that lifetime. This is all very well if you are in a monastery or dying quietly with good friends around you who can do this, but when you think of human history, much of it in the last five thousand years at least has been full of warfare and disaster. Millions of souls have not died in a peaceful way, which means that from the Tibetan point of view the residual memories of violence, of tragedy, of loss, imprinted in the subtle body are transmitted through the birthing process to become our phisic inheritance, or karma.

In the last fifteen years we've developed a very complex and broad picture in regression work of the many states of healing and release that can happen in that after death consciousness that can lead to profound changes in the lives of individuals today.

The first thing that people tend to notice when regressed to past life death transitions is their unfinished feelings. They may still be angry, they died too young on the battlefield, they are angry at the persons who had them condemned to death. There is sadness at leaving behind loved ones, there is regret at not having done more, there's blame, there's guilt, a lot of complex and deep emotions are felt as the entity leaves the body as the subtle body floats up. If they are particularly strong feelings, perhaps obsessive ones for revenge, that feeling will drive the soul or the entity that has left the body back into another incarnation to complete what was not completed. In other words there is not, as the near death experience suggests, an automatic review of the lifetime, often the feelings are far too strong. "I've got to find him, I've got to be with him," says the mother who's lost her son in a massacre. The thought that "I've got to find him" means that she follows that soul very quickly into another lifetime with no time to review the life on the inner planes or the bardo state. Now some souls do not just rise up and leave the body easily. They remain earthbound, clinging to the events they remember on the earth. This is particularly strong where children are separated from parents and parents are separated from children by death. The mother will say "I am hovering around the rubble, I am looking for them, I am looking for my children they are down there". What we have got in that state is the description of a ghost, an earth bound spirit not able to complete the movement upward into other realms. The need to find a being on the earth is obsessively holding the spirit trapped in between worlds, unable to progress or reflect. This spirit may hover around the area of the death for centuries and that part of the soul, a fragment of the greater soul, will be stuck or lost in time. The first thing that needs to happen with a spirit that is stuck on the earth plane is it needs to be aware that it has died. With the help of the therapist or guide the confused spirit can be reminded that the life is over and that he or she can leave now. Sometimes they have to create a funeral or ritual to be complete; sometimes they have to find the spirit of the dead child in the spirit realm above the earth.

The other thing that may happen is simply the aftermath of shock, where the death experience is so sudden and unexpected that the spirit simply doesn't know it's dead. Explosions often leave a spirit in some very confusing inner space somewhere above the earth unable to move and pass on.

I worked with a woman not long ago who had difficulty entering into a past life. All she could see was a roadway beneath her and buildings that looked as if they had been bombed. When I got her to look more closely she saw what looked like convoys of vehicles that had also been bombed. As she is describing this, sitting in a chair, she goes absolutely rigid. I said to her "what's your body trying to do?" and she said, "I don't know, but I've got to hold on tight". As we explored the subtle body memory it became clearer and clearer that she was holding a steering wheel and she had her foot on a brake. Slowly we pieced together the fact

that she had been a German soldier in a convoy that had been bombed by fighter planes. The soldier had died instantly, anxiously trying to stop the car and escape the bombing, but it was not a conscious death at all. Many experiences are like this: fragmentary, confused and frozen. By bringing the outside consciousness of the therapist into the story, we can usually help release the soul fragment.

Sometimes the soul experiences states of self-punishment for doing things that it is ashamed of. Such souls feel they deserve to suffer and send themselves to a psychic prison - they'll say that I'm in this dark space, that, "...I'm all alone, and I deserve to stay here because I've done terrible things." This has parallels in Tibetan literature where hellish places are places of deliberate self-punishment. We may spend what seems like a long time in those places, but eventually some kind of penitence takes place. Acknowledging how they punished themselves may bring consciousness and light to the situation helping those souls to move through.

Sometimes there is a need for those who are in a hellish state to encounter those that they have tyrannized, brutalized or killed. We had a very powerful example of a woman who remembered having been an Aztec priest sacrificing many children. After death, she was in a state of huge confusion, seeing blood and knives all the time. Eventually we were able to bring her out of this horror and then she saw the spirits of the children that she had killed. She did not want to look at them at first, but eventually they started to speak to her and she found that they were very loving and forgiving. Slowly with the interaction of the spirits, she was able to release a lot of her guilt and move on. In the past life story, the priest refuses to sacrifice children any more and he has his own heart cut out. What I did not know at first was that the woman who was having this memory not only had had open-heart surgery two years before the workshop, but she also worked in a children's hospital!

When there is a guide or therapist who is accompanying the travelling spirit, we can make decisions to go to a particular place by intent, patterns can be broken simply by asking certain questions, or by calling upon the elders. Lower planes tend to be areas of stuckness. Dante's circular hell exactly fits the pattern. The Tibetans talk about how the mental body is stuck in its own patterns - "...it is all my fault," "...I shouldn't have done that," "...I deserve to suffer." The mental body in the spirit or bardo world moves much faster, which is why the most difficult work is often to break out of obsessive and compulsive patterns such as guilt or self-doubt. As we have seen, it is extremely valuable for the person to talk to the spirits of those that have been harmed. Another example of this is of a woman who had consistently felt blocked in her career as an advertising executive. She felt inadequate, that she did not deserve to succeed. She was regressed to a past life as a naval commander in the Second World War who had given a command, which had led to the death of 300 marines in the Pacific. The commander had eventually committed suicide out of shame. In the spirit world, too, the commander was crippled by guilt. The way to break the pattern was to get the commander to call upon the spirits of all the marines who had died. He saw all 300 and recognized almost all of them. There was an extraordinary exchange and forgiveness amongst them. They said to him, "We knew that this was what war was and we went along with it. You took the decision and we share responsibility." There was a huge relief for her when the soul fragment of the commander was able to relinquish this very deep aspect of self-blame. Thus, we can encourage all kinds of dialogue in the spirit world - effectively doing therapy at the spirit level. And many of the techniques we use come from familiar psychodrama, Gestalt or Jungian active imagination protocols.

Often there are helpers and guides in spirit realms that may appear quite spontaneously when deep work is being done. Sometimes religious figures may appear, such as Jesus, Mary or Kali. It's as if the experiencer, when opening to the deeper meanings of their story, calls upon and opens up to these higher powers. Sometimes the guides take animal forms at points where physical healing is needed. These follow all of the patterns we know from Native American and totemic animals. Extremely subtle and helpful advice is given.

When a piece of work is done in the spirit world, often the spirit can move onto another level. People report that there are hierarchies of understanding at different levels. All this parallels other literature. When a soul is travelling in these higher planes, it will be attracted to areas that are like their own problems. If a soul is contemplating suicide, it is attracted to other suicides. This is not particularly helpful, however it seems to happen that like attracts like in the spirit world. Peaceful souls are attracted to other peaceful souls, angry souls to angry souls and so on.

So what is this healing about and what does it help us to understand? When we do this work in the after-death realm, we are actually performing a kind of healing ritual, integrating a part of the soul which has been stuck in an unfinished death process, bringing back a lost part of the soul, as the shamans would say. Often we are

rebalancing the emotional and physical energies through the subtle body by working on wounds, sore places, and releasing blocks in the subtle body. In areas of the physical body we often find residues of old death wounds that the person feels they deserve to carry. Sometimes the death wounds are inevitable, because the person took a certain posture in which the body froze while trying to protect itself. Asthma sufferers are often connected to past lives in concentration camps where the dying thought was; "I must not breathe the gas in." When the thought is released the organism can breathe freely again.

Equally important healing takes place when we become aware of egoic thought patterns of self-blame, self-limitation, of vengeful thoughts, shameful thoughts and thoughts of self-disgust. When brought into consciousness and seen in the context in which they arose they can be seen and let go of. When such work is done it often engenders deep compassion - we learn to die to our old selves, shedding old patterns because we see they do not belong to this life. Eventually we learn as the Tibetans say that birth and death are all one cyclical process, and they are all of the mind. We come to know what the Sufis call "the oneness of worlds" (Ghalib) and the transience of our being. If we can die consciously, if we can die first to the self, we can become lighter, less dense psychically. The process of birth is simply to let go of habit patterns, which do not belong to us. And as we shed more, our whole energy field becomes lighter and we become closer to our essence which is essentially that of beings of light. This is why the Tibetans have wisely seen that conscious dying is the greatest healing of all. Whatever we can let go of at death will not be passed on. If we can relinquish our attachment to the whole business of personality, ultimately there will be a kind of annihilation of the ego personality which may mark the beginning of the ultimate mystical journey. All these characters and stories that we have been carrying are simply the transitory masks of the soul to be cast away at the end of the drama when we find, with Shakespeare that, "our little life is ended with a sleep." Rumi says it more succinctly: Renounce all the faces in your heart So that the face without a face may come to you

I end with one of the loveliest pictures of a peaceful death process that I have come across, one of the **Four Last Songs** of Richard Strauss, in which he set to music a poem by Herman Hesse called "Beim schalfengehen" – "On going to sleep". This sublime elegy was written as the poet too was anticipating his own death.

Now wearied by the daily race
A tired child, so full of yearning
For the starry night's embrace
In kindly arms, the heavens turning

Hands now cease all busy making
Brow let go of chasing thought
Now every sense is full of aching
To be received in heaven's court

Now the soul quite freed by sleep
Longs to soar on wings of light
To live a thousandfold and deep
The magic circle of the night.

EPILOGUE

...and over there, beyond the grave, we shall say that we've suffered, and that we've wept, that we've had a bitter life, and God will take pity on us. And then, Uncle Vanya, we shall both begin to know a life that is bright and beautiful, and lovely. We shall rejoice and look back on these troubles of ours with tender feelings, with a smile—and we shall have rest!...

We shall rest! We shall hear the angels, we shall see all the heavens covered with stars like diamonds, we shall see all earthly evil, all our sufferings swept away by the grace which will fill the whole world, and our life will become beautiful, gentle, and sweet as a caress. I believe it, I believe it...

Poor Uncle Vanya, you're crying ... You've had no joy in your life, but wait, Uncle Vanya, wait ... we shall rest ... we shall rest! We shall rest!

Sonya's Vision: "The grace that will fill the whole world" from Chekhov, *Uncle Vanya* (closing speech)UE

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