

Science and the Near-Death Experience
By Chris Carter

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NEAR-DEATH EXPERIENCES ACROSS CULTURES

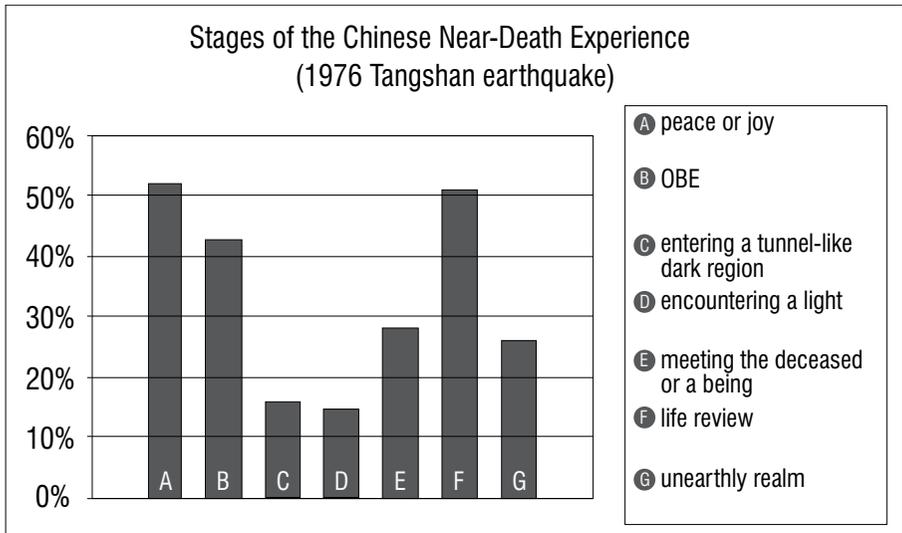
The findings discussed up to this point have been gathered from Western accounts. If the NDE is a truly universal human experience, it should occur in all cultures. What about near-death experiences in non-Western cultures?

Although comparatively few studies have involved non-Western subjects, enough data has been gathered in order to make some comparisons and to find out to what extent these experiences are culture bound.

CHINA

In 1976 an earthquake struck Tangshan, China. Eleven years later, two physicians, Feng Zhi-ying and Liu Jian-xun, interviewed eighty-one survivors, and found that 40 percent reported near-death experiences. Compared to Western accounts this is an unusually large percentage, but we must remember that this sample was not randomly chosen and that all the subjects were victims of a single disaster.

Similar to Western studies, the researchers found that age, gender, marital status, educational and occupational level, personality, brain trauma, and prior knowledge of NDEs and belief in spirits, ghosts, God, and destiny did not affect the contents of the NDE.



The main difference between the Chinese sample and Western reports seemed to be in the frequency with which the various stages were reported. Fewer Chinese subjects reported feelings of peace or joy, an out-of-body experience, entering a tunnel-like dark region, and encountering a light. Many more Chinese subjects reported a life review. The percentages who reported meeting deceased or religious figures, or seeing an unearthly realm of existence, were comparable with most Western studies. The chart above summarizes the findings from this single Chinese sample.

INDIA

The first major report of NDEs from India was presented in 1977 by Osiris and Haraldsson, who traveled to India to interview 704 Indian medical personnel about their experiences with the dying. In this sample they found sixty-four reports of NDEs, which they were able to compare with reports of fifty-six American NDEs they had gathered earlier.

The experiences of the Indian patients were similar to that of the

American patients. About 80 percent saw otherworldly apparitions, and about one-third of the Indians who reported apparitions also reported being explicitly sent back by the otherworldly figures. However, whereas the American patients were usually told something to the effect that it was not their time, or that they had unfinished work to do, the manners of the Indian apparitions seemed more bureaucratic. Messengers would sometimes escort the dying patient to a clerk, who would then consult some records and announce that a mistake had been made! The bureaucratic bungling would be corrected, and the person would then be returned to their body.

Satwant Pasricha and Ian Stevenson reported a more recent systematic survey of sixteen NDEs in northern India in 1986. The findings of Pasricha and Stevenson were generally in agreement with the earlier findings of Osis and Haraldsson. Here is a sample report concerning a woman suffering from an abdominal ailment. After she fell unconscious:

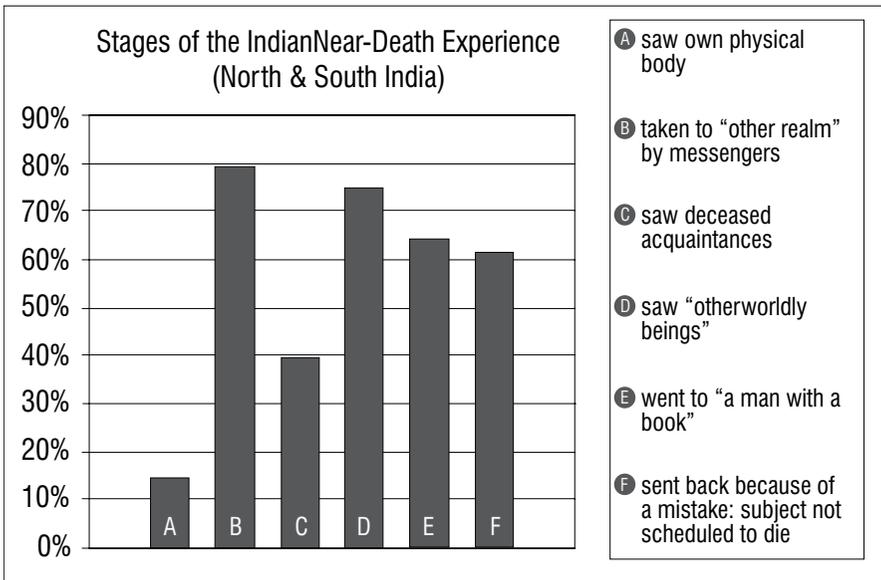
I saw three persons with curly hair coming. Then I found myself outside (on the threshold) of a door. Inside, a fat man was sitting on a bench and looking through some papers. He told those three persons: "Why have you brought her? She still has [not completed her allotted] time" and he threw away my papers. After that I do not know how I came back.

In several respects, it is apparent the Indian cases differ from the Western and Chinese ones. In all three studies, Indian accounts seem strongly influenced by Hindu religious beliefs. Yamaraj, the Hindu god of death, is a well-known figure in Indian mythology, as are his messengers, the Yamadoots. So too is Chitragupta, the man with the book, who upon a person's death is said to consult the fabled Akashic Records, in which are inscribed all the deeds, good and bad, of a person's lifetime.

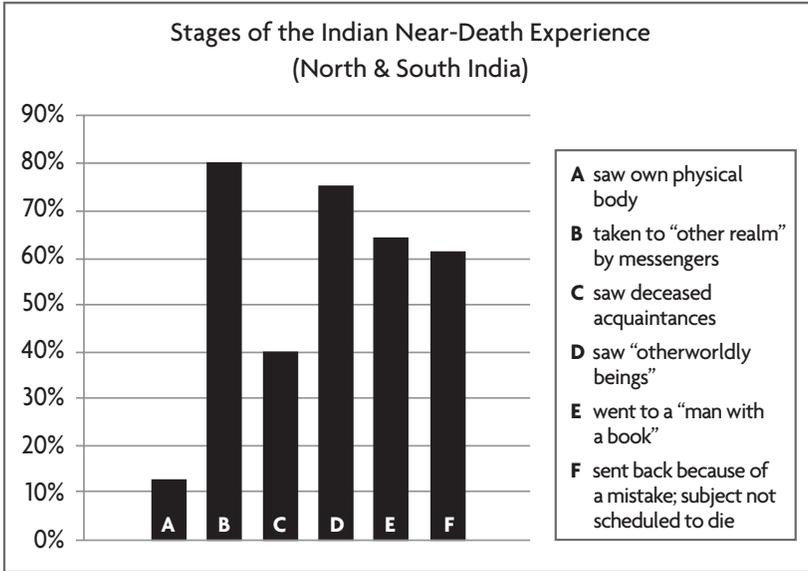
Several features typical of the Indian accounts can be seen in the following, given by a woman suffering from a fever for which she received no medical treatment.

I was dragged “up” by four yamadoots. I saw one door, and went inside. I saw my mother and father there. I also saw the Yama, who was fat and had books in front of him. The Yama started beating the yamadoots for having taken me there instead of another person. . . . I was asked by my parents and the Yama to be sent back . . . and I was happy to be back so I could see my children.

As in the account given above, the Indian subjects frequently report being taken to the “other realms” by some messengers, where a man with a book consults some records, decides a mistake has been made—that the subject’s time has not yet come—and orders the subject’s return. This contrasts especially with Western cases, in which messengers do not usually escort the subjects, and no mistake accounts for their return. None of the Indian subjects reported a panoramic life review. Although Osis and Haraldsson found several out-of-body experiences in their reports, Pasricha and Stevenson found only one case out of twenty-eight that contained this feature (see the chart below). Also, descriptions of tunnels are conspicuous by their absence from the reports of Indian subjects—not a single informant in these studies reported the experience of a tunnel.



Nevertheless, we can also see that there are some striking similarities between Indian and Western accounts. In both cultures, experiencers frequently report meeting deceased acquaintances and otherworldly beings, usually in an unearthly realm. In both sets of reports a decision is frequently made that it is not one's "time to go." And although the Indian reports lack a panoramic life review, the reading of Chitragupta's book can be considered a form of life review, although one that is thought to be postponed until the actual day of reckoning.



The chart above summarizes the main features of the Indian NDEs, taken from the two studies mentioned above by Pasricha and Stevenson, and Pasricha.

The most prominent features shared by the Indian and Western cases seem to be the perception of traveling to an unearthly realm and there meeting deceased acquaintances and otherworldly beings. Yet we also have seen that the otherworldly beings reported in the Indian experiences are those suggested by Indian mythology. However, as Pasricha and Stevenson point out, social variations in another realm, if another exists, should be expected, just as there are variations in features of our own world. The fact that different “inhabitants” are perceived by experiencers from different cultures could indicate the influence of culture on hallucination, but the same fact could just as easily be taken to indicate travels to different parts of the same world.

NATIVE AMERICA

There have been several stories of NDEs gathered from Native American accounts. H. R. Schoolcraft’s 1825 work *Travels in the Central Portion*

of the *Mississippi Valley* contains two such accounts. The first tale, “The Funeral Fire,” tells of a Chippewa leader who was shot in battle. He saw his warriors mourn him, and as they left he leaped out of his body to follow his friends, trying without success to get their attention. Upon return to the camp, he also tried to get his wife’s attention, but it was no use. Schoolcraft writes, “Foiled thus in every attempt to make himself known, the warrior-chief began to reflect upon what he had heard in his youth, that the spirit was sometimes permitted to leave the body and wander about. He reflected that possibly his body may have remained upon the field of battle, while his spirit only accompanied his returning friends.”⁵

He then decided to return to his body and after a four-day journey came to the outskirts of the battlefield, where a moving fire continually blocked his path. After leaping through the fire he woke up alive. He told his story to his people upon his return to camp.

The second tale tells of a village chief who died and traveled through paradise, which had beautiful groves and numerous animals, to “the village of the dead.” He returned to his grave to get his gun, and on his way met a large number of people carrying funeral paraphernalia—a procession of the recently deceased on their way to the land of the dead. When he reached his grave, he jumped through a line of fire blocking his way and in the effort came alive, and was thus able to relate his story.

In the 1930s, Black Elk, a shaman of the Sioux nation, related his life story to Nebraska poet John Neidhardt, who published it in his book *Black Elk Speaks*. In one chapter, Black Elk describes what appears to be an NDE that occurred to him in 1890 after he collapsed during a dance, although it is unclear if those around him thought that he was dead or dying.

After awhile I began to feel very queer. First, my legs seemed to be full of ants. I was dancing with my eyes closed, as the others did. Suddenly it seemed that I was swinging off the ground and not touching it any longer. . . . There was no fear with this, just a growing happiness.

I must have fallen down, but I felt as though I had fallen off

a swing when it was going forward, and I was floating head first through the air.

There was a ridge right in front of me, and I thought I was going to run into it, but I went right over it. On the other side of the ridge I could see a beautiful land where many, many people were camping in a great circle. I could see that they were happy and had plenty. The air was clear and beautiful with a living light that was everywhere.

I floated over the tepees and began to come down feet first at the center of the hoop where I could see a beautiful tree all green and full of flowers. When I touched the ground, two men were coming toward me, and they wore holy shirts made and painted in a certain way. They came to me and said: "It is not yet time to see your father, who is happy. You have work to do."

They told me to return at once, and then I was out in the air again, floating fast as before. When I came right over the dancing place, the people were still dancing, but it seemed they were not making any sound.

Then I fell back into my body, and as I did this I heard voices all around and above me, and I was sitting on the ground. Many were crowding around, asking me what vision I had seen.⁶

Shortly before he died in 1909, Apache war chief Geronimo dictated his memoirs through an interpreter to S. M. Barrett. In chapter 20, Geronimo relates this story:

Once when living in San Carlos Reservation an Indian told me that while lying unconscious on the battlefield he had actually been dead, and had passed into the spirit land.

First he came to a mulberry tree growing out from a cave in the ground. Before this cave a guard was stationed, but when he approached without fear the guard let him pass. He descended into the cave . . . sliding rapidly down its steep side into the darkness. He landed in a narrow passage running due westward through a canon [canyon] which gradually grew lighter and lighter until he could

see as well as if it had been daylight; but there was no sun. Finally he came to a section of this passage that was wider for a short distance, and then closing abruptly continued in a narrow path. . . . He continued to follow the narrow passage . . . emerging into a section beyond which he could see nothing: the further walls of this section were clashing together at regular intervals with tremendous sounds, but when he approached they stood apart until he had passed. After this he seemed to be in a forest, and following the natural draws, which led westward, soon came into a green valley where there were many Indians camped and plenty of game. He said that he saw and recognized many whom he had known in this life, and that he was sorry when he was brought back to consciousness.⁷

In these Native American accounts, we find several of the components of the Western NDE, including OBEs, encountering a barrier, traveling to another world, and contact with the deceased, but no life review is mentioned in any of these accounts. With the possible exception of the story told by Geronimo, there is also no mention of a tunnel. In that case, descriptions of a tunnel are ambiguous, as a “narrow passage” is mentioned. Whether or not the narrow passage is interpreted as a tunnel of sorts, there does seem to be a passage through darkness and an emergence into light.

GUAM

Timothy Green reported learning of four NDEs among the native Chamorro people while working in Guam as a school psychologist. Two were told to him directly, and two were recorded by a local man interested in the subject.

In the first, a Chamorra woman “who had been pronounced dead four days after being hospitalized” reported traveling through the clouds and visiting relatives in America, where she claimed her granddaughter saw her. After leaving the scene, she reported meeting a man standing beside a road, who said to her in Chamorro, “You are not the one being called.”⁸

The second concerns a Chamorra woman who had become ill and