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**The Near-Death Experience and the
Tibetan Buddhist View of Death: A Comparison^{1,2}**

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*It is one of the oldest and most universal practices
for the initiate to go through the experience of
death before he can be spiritually reborn.*

--Lama Anagarika Govinda (1957)

Throughout its long history, Tibetan Buddhism has reflected an emphasis upon the process of death and dying. In an earlier study (Coberly & Shapiro, 1993), we presented an introductory overview of the Tibetan Buddhist perspective on death and dying. The events occurring during the process of dying, the *bar.do*³ after death, or intermediate state, and the subsequent period during which one's next rebirth takes place are described in a collection of texts--the so-called Tibetan Books of the Dead. These texts consist of instructions which may be read aloud to guide an individual as he or she progresses through the stages of dying and the after-death period.

near-death reports have now captured the imagination of scientists in the West. The typical contents of modern reports about the near-death experience in the United States exhibit some apparent similarities (notwithstanding vast cultural differences) with the phenomena associated with the dying process and the intermediate state after death as described in Tibetan Buddhism. The major purpose of this study, is to call attention to and present a preliminary comparison of some of the phenomena associated with death and dying in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition and in the modern Western near-death experience.

Tibetan Buddhism

The Tibetan Buddhist account of death and dying asserts that there are five successive stages to the death process, each stage corresponding to the dissolution of one of five elements (e.g., Lati Rinbochay & Hopkins, 1979). The five stages are:

Stage 1: Dissolution of the earth element, related to flesh and bone, paving the way for the dissolution of the water element.

Stage 2: Dissolution of the water element, related to blood and fluids, paving the way for the dissolution of the fire element.

Stage 3: Dissolution of the fire element, related to digestion and internal heat, paving the way for the dissolution of the wind element.

Stage 4: Dissolution of the wind element, related to breath and circulation, paving the way for the dissolution of the element of consciousness.

Stage 5: Dissolution of the consciousness element, related to conceptualizations. This is the process in which the coarser forms of consciousness progressively dissolve into more subtle ones in four phases. The last phase of dissolution is both the point of actual death in the Tibetan Buddhist system, and the point at which the most subtle consciousness, the clear light of death--infinite and radiant, brilliantly luminous--becomes manifest. At the moment of death, the mental-continuum has the potential to recognize itself as of the same nature as primordial luminosity, thereby achieving psychosoteriological emancipation. However, most people are blinded by the intense clarity and thus overwhelmed by an experience of total darkness, whereupon the individual experiences the sensation of swooning. After a three to four day interval, the individual awakens from the swoon and begins a psychological journey that can last up to 49 days.⁴ In the after-death intermediate state, an individual may experience lights, sounds, and colors,

and a series of peaceful and then wrathful deities. This series of events may also include a look into the mirror of karma held up by *Dharmarāja*, the Lord of Death (Evans-Wentz, 1957; Fremantle & Chögyam Trungpa, 1975). Reflected in the mirror are all the thoughts, words, and deeds of one's lifetime, like a life-review. At the end of the after-death intermediate state, the individual's consciousness enters a womb. Ordinary beings are said to take rebirth at the mercy of their karma, while highly realized beings are able to consciously select a rebirth conducive for helping others.

Buddhism teaches that a practitioner can achieve an enlightened understanding about the true nature of existence by realizing the impermanent, continually changing nature of all composite phenomena. Therefore, the practice of meditating on death serves as a reminder of the omnipresence of impermanence. Tibetan Buddhist practice also includes meditations and exercises to train a practitioner in understanding the clear luminous nature of the mind. The radiant clear light can be recognized during the process of dissolution of the elements at the time of death, or in the after-death intermediate state, wherein one has the potential to recognize that the visions encountered there are manifestations of the mind's primordial

luminosity. More details about the Tibetan Buddhist perspective on death and dying can be found in our earlier presentation (Coberly & Shapiro, 1993).

The Near-Death Experience

The near-death experience can be defined as a series of events that are experienced by persons who have either: (a) clinically died and then been successfully resuscitated; or, (b) had a close brush with death in a near-fatal accident, such as drowning, a severe fall, or an automobile collision (Audette, 1982; Lorimer, 1989; Noyes & Kletti, 1982; Ring, 1984a). Clinical death is signaled by the cessation of vital signs--blood pressure, pulse, and respiration. Clinical death can sometimes be reversed with the application of effective resuscitative measures. Although not all survivors of clinical death report the near-death experience, a significant number do recall such an experience (22%-43%, see Groth-Marnat & Schumaker, 1989).

Although there is a wide range of individual differences among the near-death reports, some remarkable consistencies have emerged (e.g., Greyson & Flynn, 1984; Lundahl, 1982; Moody, 1976, 1977, 1988; Morse, 1990, 1992; Ring, 1982a, 1984b, 1984c; Sutherland, 1987/1988). Most near-death experiences include reports of an ineffable peace that occurs after

clinical death. From within this state of indescribable peacefulness, the individual realizes that he or she is no longer in the body, but in a state of objective detachment, observing the proceedings from overhead. An auto accident victim recalls, "I could see my own body all tangled up in the car amongst all the people who had gathered around, but, you know, I had no feelings for it whatsoever" (Moody, 1976, pp. 40-41). A person resuscitated from cardiac arrest relates, "I recognized me laying there...about like looking at a dead worm or something. I didn't have any desire to go back to it" (Sabom, 1982, p. 21). A man resuscitated from a heart attack observed, "It seemed like I was up there in space and just my mind was active. No body feeling...I had nothing but my mind. Weightless, I had nothing" (Ring, 1982a, p. 45).

Some of those who experience near-death report being surrounded by a rich darkness and moving towards a brilliant, love-filled light (Ring, 1982a; Sabom, 1982). The darkness is sometimes reported as a tunnel-like passageway (e.g., Moody, 1976). An elderly woman who was resuscitated after a cardiac arrest said, "I remember...total, peaceful, wonderful blackness. Very peaceful blackness" (Ring, 1982a, p. 55). A woman who survived clinical death after surgery said, "There was total blackness around me. I want to say it felt like

I was moving very, very fast in time and space" (Sabom, 1982, p. 41). Another person recalled, "I could feel myself...being drawn through this tunnel. And there was this light at the end. God it was so bright! And as I neared it I could feel the warmth enveloping me...." (Zaleski, 1987, p. 124).

As the near-death experience continues, the person may feel as if merged with a brilliant light and have a feeling of pure love. A man rescued from suffocation reports, "And then, before you is this...most magnificent, just gorgeous beautiful, bright, white or blue-white light...the light communicates to you and for the first time in your life...is a feeling of true, pure love" (Ring, 1984a, pp. 57-58). In the presence of this light, the near-death experiencer often witnesses a panoramic vision of his or her entire life spontaneously passing in review. Noyes and Kletti (1972) translated the following description by Albert Heim, an early investigator, who wrote about his own near-death episode in 1892:

I saw my whole past life take place in many images, as though on a stage at some distance from me. I saw myself as the chief character in the performance. Everything was transfigured as though by a heavenly light and everything was

beautiful without grief, without anxiety, and without pain. (p. 50)

Another near-death survivor reported to Moody (1977) that the panoramic life-review in the presence of the light prompted the realization that "...for a second I knew all the secrets of all ages, all the meaning of the universe, the stars, the moon--of everything" (p. 10). Another survivor told Ring (1984a):

And inside this radiant luminous light....What occurred was every emotion I have ever felt in my life, I felt. And my eyes were showing me the basis of how that emotion affected my life. What my life had done so far to affect other people's lives using the feeling of pure love that was surrounding me as the point of comparison.... Lookin' at yourself from the point of how much love you have spread to other people is devastatin'. You will never get over it. I am six years away from that day and I am not over it yet. (p. 71)

Having encountered such feelings of peace and love in the near-death experience, these individuals, for various reasons, often reluctantly return to the physical body, and typically describe the experience in an overwhelmingly positive way.⁵ Moreover, they

frequently report a transformation in their general view of life, including much less fear of death, a heightened concern for the welfare of others, and a recognition of the importance of living in the present moment (Moody, 1976; Ring, 1982a; Sabom, 1982).

Physical explanations have been proposed to account for the near-death phenomena such as the influence of drugs (Siegel, 1980), oxygen deprivation (Rodin, 1980), limbic lobe syndrome (Carr, 1982), and psychiatric depersonalization (Noyes & Kletti, 1976). Such explanations, however, do not appear to account for the transformative changes that occur within individuals on their return from the near-death event. An alternative approach to such skeptical considerations about the near-death experience (NDE) has recently been stated by Wren-Lewis (1988):

The specific content of NDEs, while undeniably interesting, tends now to be seen as secondary; primary significance is given to the unquestionable fact that a close encounter with death, whether clinically or only in a life-threatening situation, seems to produce in many cases a remarkable change of consciousness, which is worthy of study in its own right, and which, on any reasonable reckoning, is highly significant

for our estimates about what kind of creature the human being is. (p. 108)

The Near-Death Experience in Comparison with the Tibetan Buddhist Dying Process and After-Death Intermediate State

We have studied the typical components of the near-death experience, as reported by the major Western contributors to the field of near-death research over the past 15 years, and compared them with Tibetan Buddhist accounts of dying and the after-death intermediate state. The major Western researchers we studied were Grey (1985), Moody (1976, 1977, 1988), Morse (1990), Ring (1982a, 1982b, 1984a, 1984b, 1984c, 1988), and Sabom (1982). Among the core experiences described by these researchers are: (a) peace; (b) separation from the body; (c) darkness or a tunnel; (d) seeing beings of light; (e) entering the light; (f) a life-review; and, (g) a transformed mental outlook. (A given individual does not necessarily encounter every element of the core experience.) From our study of the data, it was evident that some overall apparently similar themes appear in the near-death experience and in the Tibetan Buddhist description of the process of dying (especially Stage 5) and the after-death experiences of the intermediate state. An exposition and comparison of each core element in the near-death

experience and phenomena described in the Tibetan Buddhist literature will now be presented.

Sense of Peace

The near-death experience usually includes a report of the dying person feeling a deep sense of peace. A near-death survivor described it to Ring (1982a) as "a feeling that I think everybody dreams of someday having. Reaching a point of absolute peace" (p. 43). In the Tibetan Buddhist view, there are times during the after-death intermediate state when one may encounter peaceful divinities and experience "completely encompassing peace, immovable, invincible peace, the peaceful state that cannot be challenged, that has no age, no end, no beginning" (Fremantle & Chögyam Trungpa, 1975, p. 13).

Out-of-Body-Experience

The out-of-body experience described in the near-death experience can be related to certain phenomena found in the Tibetan Buddhist literature on death and dying. In Tibetan Buddhism, the body is regarded as a temporary abode for the mental-continuum that is associated with it. Certain exercises, such as *pho.wa*, or transference of consciousness, allow the practitioner to master the art of consciously projecting the mind out of the body while in meditation. In the Tibetan Buddhist view, it is also

possible for a person's consciousness, out of confusion and attachment, to "hover around" and perhaps even try to reenter the corpse⁶ (Lama Lodö, 1987). Reports of the near-death experience typically state that the individual has no desire to reenter the body, and that the decision to return to life is made out of a sense of duty and obligation to earthly responsibilities (Moody, 1976; Ring, 1982a).

Entering the Darkness

During Stage 5 of the death process as described in the Tibetan Buddhist literature, a rich darkness pervades the mental-continuum and it falls into a swoon for three to four days. Some near-death reports contain descriptions of a warm and peaceful darkness or tunnel through which rapid movement may be sensed. At the end of the darkness or tunnel a luminous and radiant light may be seen.

Seeing Beings of Light

Moody's (1976) characterization of the core phenomena of the near-death experience includes seeing relatives who have died⁷ and other beings characterized as being in a form of light. Moody labeled these visual objects "beings of light," and the term has since come generally "to refer to a luminous, seemingly omniscient presence encountered by some near-death experiencers" (Ring, 1984a, p. 323). Such entities of

light have also been reported by the other major researchers we studied.

The moment of clinical death in Western medicine, namely, when vital signs cease, corresponds to the dissolving of the wind element in the Tibetan Buddhist view. As the wind element dissolves during Stage 4 of the dying process, the mind may become agitated and the dying person may experience various internal visions. These are said to arise from predispositions caused by actions performed in a previous lifetime. People who are religious, for example, may experience visions of familiar deities, or people such as relatives and friends, coming to guide them to another existence. The encounters with beings of light that are reported in Western near-death research also appear to have some commonality with the peaceful visions that appear in the intermediate state after death. Both the near-death experience literature and the Tibetan Buddhist literature assert that the clear radiant light and the beings or deities that manifest within the light are indescribably peaceful and harmonious. One major difference between the Tibetan Buddhist and the near-death experience accounts lies in the interpretation of the source or origin of the visions that appear. Near-death reports describe visions that seem to have an inherent reality of their own, as though there is

another, independent world of spirits or beings that exists apart from the experiencer. In contrast, the Tibetan Buddhist view asserts that after-death visions are products or projections of the perceiver's own mind.

Entering the Light

In this stage, as Ring (1982a) describes it, one appears to move through the light into "a world of light" (p. 246). Moody (1976) found that those experiencing near-death were often overwhelmed by the intense peace and love felt in the light. Ring (1982a) found that individuals who entered the light felt such bliss as to not want to leave. Sabom (1982) classified reports of the light as being ineffable and inexplicably peaceful.

In Tibetan Buddhism, the primordial radiant light is considered to be the natural state of mind and the basic nature of the mind from which all experience is produced. Whether during life, the dying process, or the after-death period, one can achieve liberation from the continual cycle of birth and death and its attendant sufferings by becoming aware that all beings and phenomena are impermanent, unsatisfactory, and selfless, or empty of inherent reality. That is, fundamentally, all of our experience is at root

constructed by the mind--primordial luminosity, and is empty of inherent existence.

The Life-Review

The life-review, sometimes called panoramic memory in the Western research literature (Noyes & Kletti, 1977; Ring, 1982a), is part of the core experience reported by some near-death experience researchers. During the after-death intermediate state described in the Tibetan Buddhist literature, *Dharmarāja*, the Lord of Death, looks into the mirror of karma wherein all the individual's virtuous and nonvirtuous actions are reflected. *Dharmarāja* weighs out with white and black stones one's good and bad deeds in accordance with the law of karma (Evans-Wentz, 1957; Fremantle & Chögyam Trungpa, 1975). This weighing of one's life experiences resembles, in part, the life-review phase of the near-death experience in which the person sees, as both observer and experiencer, his or her life rapidly unfolding like a movie on a screen. In the Tibetan Buddhist account, the life-review is depicted as a calculation of one's karmic bank account, whereas, in the near-death literature, the life-review is usually described objectively, without judgment as to the merit of one's actions.

Transformation

In terms of psychological insight and self-development, the most important similarity between the Tibetan Buddhist account of death and dying and the Western near-death experience lies in the transformative effect that these experiences can have on a person's existential attitudes. Moody (1988) reports that "There is one common element in all near-death experiences: they transform the people who have them" (p. 27). Ring (1984a) states that the near-death experience "not only changes an individual's life, but often completely and radically transforms it" (p. 120). For most people who have undergone a near-death experience, images of light and peace and love replace the classic images of death as dark and ominous--"the skull that grins in at the banquet," as William James once said (Peay, 1991). The far-reaching changes brought about by a near-death experience are likely to reflect an individual's contact with an expanded view of reality (Grosso, 1989). Ring (1982a) has proposed that the near-death experience causes a transpersonal state in which the customary functioning of the ego is interrupted or even absent, a state in which the subject becomes more open or experiences an expanded awareness.

Whatever the exact precipitating dynamics, the world appears in a very different way to subjects of the near-death experience after the event. Individuals report a sense of unconditional love and unity with all life forms, whereas separation was previously predominant (Bauer, 1985; Flynn, 1982, 1986; Greyson, 1984; Lorimer, 1989; Moody, 1976, 1977, 1988; Noyes, 1980; Ring, 1982a, 1984a; Sabom, 1982). Exposure to a transpersonal, expanded reality beyond conventional experience also imparts to such individuals what Ring (1988) identifies as an awakening to a higher potential, a concern for the welfare of others, and a diminished fear of death together with a heightened appreciation for life.

The transformation precipitated by the near-death experience is similar to other transformations that can occur in more conventional near-death situations such as terminal illness (Coberly, in press). Here, too, an individual's point of view can shift from a limited world view and conventional fear of death to a greater acceptance of the nature of existence and a greater understanding of the preciousness of each moment of life.

People who have had a near-death experience tend to report having a lasting positive transformation in their perception of themselves and their purpose in

life (Morse, 1990, 1992). Whatever one believes about the source of the near-death experience, it is evident that "it must be respected as an extremely powerful catalyst for transformation" (Greyson & Harris, 1987, p. 44). Thus, the importance of the near-death experience is ultimately not its association with death, but rather, its implications for life (Greyson, 1990).

Unlike the fortuitous transformations precipitated by the near-death experience, the Tibetan Buddhist psychology of death and dying incorporates the potential for profound transformation through various practices, including the deliberate cultivation of death awareness during one's lifetime. Cultivating an awareness of death can precipitate a sustained recognition of the continually changing, impermanent nature of the universe, which, along with knowledge of the law of karma, provides the basis for a transformation from self-centered, greed-motivated actions to a more altruistic concern for the welfare of all living things. As mentioned earlier, transformation can occur at the end of the dying process, during the after-death period, or during one's lifetime.

Mind, Transpersonal Awareness, and Death

The visions and experiences that are described in both the near-death experience and the Tibetan Buddhist account of dying and the after-death intermediate state appear to have some similarities. However, it will be necessary for continuing research to explore the content and chronology of the comparative data in greater detail. A primary purpose of our presentation has been to stimulate such further investigation. Our conclusions must be regarded, at this point, only as preliminary because: (a) We have compared only the most prominent features of the near-death experience with the Tibetan Buddhist account of death and dying, ignoring, for the time being, the extensive literature on less frequent and idiosyncratic phenomena; (b) Thus far, we have only been able to take into account the Tibetan Buddhist literature on death and dying, and the related oral traditions, now available in English translation. Eventually, as further translations are undertaken, it will be possible for those unfamiliar with the Tibetan language to take account of more of the Tibetan literature and oral teachings. Within the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, there also exist differing interpretations of some details of the dying process. These differences require further examination; and, (c) It may be premature at this point to assume that the

phenomena of the near-death experience are necessarily coextensive in time with the phenomena described in the Tibetan Buddhist literature.⁹ It is clear, however, that both the Western and Tibetan perspectives call attention to the fundamental importance of the mind in creating and structuring our experience of reality. Whether one believes the events associated with dying to be intrinsic to the mental-continuum, as is the case with Tibetan Buddhism, or external to it, as is generally the case with the Western near-death experience, these events can nevertheless precipitate a powerful and liberating psychological transformation.

The similarities between the near-death experience and the traditional Tibetan Buddhist account of dying and the after-death intermediate state have implications for those facing death in general. Both views support the idea that one's state of mind can influence the circumstances surrounding one's death--easing the anxiety, pain, and terror that often psychologically dominate situations involving terminal illness (Coberly, in press). Providing an environment in which a dying person can maintain dignity, freedom from pain, and the acceptance of mortality as natural can be seen as part of *ars moriendi*--the art of dying (Perry, 1989). *Ars moriendi* involves not only the inward journey of self-exploration on the part of a

dying patient, but also each family member's attitude and adaptation as the terminally ill person changes physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually. Perry, among others (e.g., Bertman, 1991; Kubler-Ross, 1975), affirms that practicing the art of dying during one's lifetime gives meaning to both life and death. This view is similar to the Tibetan Buddhist perspective and the cultivation of death awareness.

The phenomena asserted to occur near death in both the literature of Tibetan Buddhism and of the near-death experience include an expanded, transpersonal awareness characterized in terms of infinite, primordial, radiant light. Recognition of this luminosity effects a deep-felt sense of peace, harmony, and unity. A conscious encounter with the clear, infinite and radiant light at the time of death can bring about a positive, transformative illumination of what we ordinarily perceive as our darkest moment.

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Footnotes

¹ This study is based upon a master's thesis completed in May, 1992 (Coberly, 1992). Shortly thereafter, a book by the contemporary Tibetan Buddhist teacher, Sogyal Rinpoche, was published which contains a chapter devoted to a discussion of the Tibetan Buddhist view of death and dying and the Western near-death experience (1992, pp. 319-336). Sogyal Rinpoche notes some of the same comparable elements outlined in this study. At the same time, he generally cautions about making comparisons since the near-death experience may be "a phenomenon that belongs to the natural bardo of this life" (p. 332), rather than the Tibetan Buddhist after-death period. Nevertheless, Sogyal Rinpoche goes on to state:

Whatever the ultimate meaning of the details of the near-death experience, I remain extremely moved by the many accounts I have heard or read, and struck especially by some of the attitudes that flow from these experiences....the profound transformation and spiritual awakening that takes place in those who have been through this experience; and the implications for our lives of the life-review....The central message that the near-death experiencers bring back from their

encounter with death, or the presence or "being of light," is exactly the same as that of Buddha and of the bardo teachings: that the essential and most important qualities in life are love and knowledge, compassion and wisdom. (p. 332)

As this manuscript went to press, a detailed comparison of the Western near-death experience and the Tibetan Buddhist account of death and dying has just been published by Carr (1993), a study we commend to the reader's attention. Carr also cites a comparative study by Epstein (1990) which we had not been aware of earlier.

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³ In the Tibetan Buddhist Tradition, life and death are sometimes described as a continuum consisting of six periods: (a) the *bar.do* of life; (b) the *bar.do* of the dream state; (c) the *bar.do* of meditation; (d)

the *bar.do* of dying; (e) the *bar.do* that is the intermediate state between death and rebirth; and, (f) the *bar.do* of becoming, in which the search for rebirth takes place (Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche, 1991; Lauf, 1977). The first three *bar.do* periods pertain to living; the last three, to death and dying.

⁴ References to "days" or other time constructs in the Tibetan Buddhist description of the stages of dying and the after-death period do not necessarily correspond to conventional human time periods. Also, there are variant texts with differing time periods and associated phenomena.

⁵ Negative experiences have also been reported, although they occur more rarely (Grey, 1985; Rawlings, 1991).

⁶ Chökyi Nyima Rinpoche (1991) states: "There have been rare cases where the consciousness, having left the body, actually returns to the corpse, revives it and continues to live" (p. 153).

⁷ The core phenomena of deathbed visions developed by Osis and Haraldsson (1986) also includes the deceased family and friends appearing to the dying person and guiding him or her to another world.

⁸ Although some speculations have been made about the near-death experience based on the assumption that it is coextensive in time with the Tibetan Buddhist

account of death and dying (Becker, 1985), Sogyal Rinpoche (1992) hesitates to make such an assumption (see footnote 1 above).

⁹ The names of Tibetan authors have not been inverted.