

Modern Science, Psychology, and the Enduring Mystery of Consciousness: An Esoteric/Mystical Critique, Part V. The Visionary Experience

James Moffatt

Abstract

This article focuses on the visionary/transcendent experience and its significance in challenging the materialist orthodoxy regarding the nature of consciousness. These higher states of consciousness indicate that consciousness is a universal property which manifests on a scale of dimensions which constitutes the traditional concept of the Great Chain of Being. In addition to considering the commentaries of Yogananda, Huxley, and Grof regarding the nature of consciousness and reality as it is experienced in visionary states, an overview of the Near-Death Experience literature is presented. The convergence of research documenting the visionary experience and the NDE provides compelling evidence for esoteric claims that the human brain, rather than producing consciousness, serves to facilitate consciousness by “stepping it down” from its higher-dimensional origins. Transcendent states of consciousness, in life and near-death, reveal that human beings are capable of realizing transformative experiences of higher dimensions, spiritual illumination, and unity with Creation.

Yogananda’s Experience of Cosmic Consciousness

In his classic work, *Autobiography of A Yogi*,¹ Paramahansa Yogananda recounts how, after years of studying with his guru, Sri Yukteswar, he had become frustrated by his failure to experience the transcendent states of consciousness that are reputed to be the incomparable fruits of years of meditative discipline. Laughing in sympathy at his student’s plaintive description of his inability to fulfill his “heart’s desire,” Yogananda’s guru sudden-

ly and unexpectedly reaches out and strikes him on the chest, above his heart, causing an immediate and dramatic expansion of his consciousness.

No longer confined to his physical body, Yogananda describes his soul and mind as being freed of their physical bondage and streaming out “like a fluid piercing light from my every pore.”² Although his flesh appeared to be dead, he states that: “I knew that never before had I been fully alive. My sense of identity was no longer narrowly confined to a body but embraced the circumambient atoms.”³ Yogananda recounts how his normal “frontal vision” was transformed into “a vast spherical sight, simultaneously all-perceptive”⁴ and that, consequently, he was able to see in all directions (even out of the back of his head!) over vast distances, while simultaneously being able to see through the soil into the roots of plants and trees and discern the flow of their sap.

Continuing, Yogananda describes the incredible transformation in his perception and direct apprehension of the material world:

All objects within my panoramic gaze trembled and vibrated like quick motion pictures. My body, Master’s, the pillared

About the Author

James Moffatt was raised in Ottawa, Ontario, where he attended Carleton University and earned degrees in both Sociology and Psychology. For the past 35 years, James has collaborated with Dr. Christopher Holmes in studying, writing, and lecturing about consciousness from an esoteric mystical perspective. James resides in Toronto, where he is employed as a law clerk, and also works as a freelance legal and medical writer.

courtyard, the furniture and the floor, the trees and sunshine, occasionally became violently agitated, until all melted into a luminescent sea; even as sugar crystals, thrown into a glass of water, dissolve after being shaken. *The unifying light alternated with materializations of form, the metamorphosis revealing the law of cause and effect in creation.*

An oceanic joy broke upon calm endless shores of my soul. The Spirit of God, I realized, is exhaustless Bliss; His body is *countless tissues of light*. A swelling glory within me began to envelop towns, continents, the earth, solar and stellar systems, tenuous nebulae, and floating universes. The entire cosmos, gently luminous, like a city seen afar at night, glimmered within the infinitude of my being....

The divine dispersion of rays poured from an Eternal Source, blazing into galaxies, transfigured with ineffable auras. Again and again, I saw the creative beams condense into constellations, then resolve into sheets of transparent flame. By rhythmic reversion, sextillion worlds passed into diaphanous luster, then fire became firmament.

*I cognized the centre of the empyrean as a point of intuitive perception in my heart. Irradiating splendour issued from my nucleus to every part of the universal structure.*⁵ [emphasis added]

Eventually, Yogananda's consciousness returns to "the humiliating cage of a body, not easily accommodative to the Spirit."⁶ His Master explains that: "It is the Spirit of God that actively sustains every form and force in the universe; yet He is transcendental and aloof in the blissful uncreated void beyond the worlds of vibratory phenomenon."⁷

Yogananda's state of cosmic consciousness is noteworthy for a number of reasons and may be considered from numerous angles. In putting forth these considerations, my intention is to prompt the reader to realize that if Yogananda's experience is "real" and his commentaries on its meaning are valid, then modern psychologists' and scientists' understanding of consciousness is based on a set of untenable

metaphysical assumptions about the nature of human beings, the Universe, and reality. First and foremost, I would submit that Yogananda's experience suggests that a yogi's preparation and development allows him to experience a state of mystical union which is particularly comprehensive and meaningful because, as a result of his disciplined self-study, he has already reached a certain level of self-realization—through purification of his body, heart, and mind—and is capable, therefore, of experiencing these heightened states of consciousness. Secondly, his master's level of consciousness is such that he is able to produce this experience, in his disciple, at will. Thirdly, Yogananda is capable, at least to a certain extent, of interpreting and describing elements of his experience in terms of ordinary language because his level of development has made his transcendent experience intelligible to him.

At the same time, we can extrapolate from this account and identify a number of important considerations in weighing the significance of one's state of consciousness in determining the reality which one apprehends and is capable of apprehending. It is noteworthy that, while Yogananda's consciousness expands beyond his physical organism and his perceptual capacities are profoundly enhanced; his sense of self initially remains essentially the same. As his consciousness continues to expand, however, it becomes progressively "higher" in the sense that it is a more comprehensive state of apprehension in which the normal state's limitations and illusions are transparent—even as they are being transcended. Thus, in his higher state, Yogananda recognizes the illusory nature of the material realm insofar as "he" is penetrating it and apprehending that it is being informed by higher, more refined, subtle realms of consciousness and being. As such, Yogananda's knowing is direct and unmediated and, therefore, more objective than the level of apprehension which he experiences in the normal waking state of consciousness. In this higher, more objective state, he knows that his knowledge is more objective because he is in a state of union; the discursive knowing that characterizes the normal egoistic subjective consciousness in which there exists an apparently self-evident separation between subject

and object has been, at once, revealed and transcended. However, this state of union is not complete and continues to progress: becoming deeper and more comprehensive and coherent, insofar as he goes from being able to have direct insight into the subtle dimensions and the processes by which they are interpenetrating the physical realm of his immediate neighborhood to a more global level of apprehension ... to a further level of galactic apprehension ... to an interstellar, cosmic level of apprehension ... and finally to a dissolution of time and space in the realization of union with eternity! As “he sees” galaxies and world orders being created and destroyed, he has clearly overcome the bounds of not only space, but time. Yogananda knows himself, the Universe, and God because he *is at one with everything*.

On reading this account carefully, the question arises: *where is Yogananda when he is in this state of union?* He states his experience lasted only a few minutes—yet he claims to have known the entire Universe. But that is clearly impossible insofar as he would have to be “traveling” faster than the speed of light! But Yogananda maintains that it is not only possible to realize this state of union in which a yogi transcends the limits of time and space, but explains in significant detail how the practice of Kriya Yoga allows for such miraculous experiences. Indeed, Yogananda—and numerous other masters and mystics—explain that, by knowing the higher Self, it is possible to know oneself as *a body of light* and, by doing so, achieve infinite mass, thereby transcending the limitations of the time-space continuum.

Those readers who are familiar with Christopher Holmes’ four-part series of Esoteric Quarterly articles—“The Origins And Nature Of Human Consciousness”⁸—may recall that, in citing Yogananda’s experience of cosmic consciousness, I am broaching a subject which Holmes has already addressed in detail. I would refer the reader to Holmes’ articles in order to place his consideration of Yogananda’s startling claims in the context of his arguments regarding the nature of consciousness. Holmes argues that Yogananda’s account substantiates his theoretical position: that the higher Self is rooted into the higher metaphys-

ical dimensions of the heart. While I will address that issue in a subsequent article, I want to focus on the fact that it was some 37 years ago when Holmes and I first read Yogananda’s account of cosmic consciousness. At that time, we were psychology graduate students, who had only recently begun to study esoteric and mystical teachings. As academics, we were certainly aware that Yogananda’s claims were “anecdotal”—as such, his experience did not conform to or satisfy the criteria of a controlled experiment—but, nonetheless, we were convinced that his experience and his explanation of its dynamics were topics worthy of our interest. We recognized that Yogananda’s account could not and should not be accepted uncritically; in itself, his experience may or may not have been legitimate. And even if his experience was essentially true, that would not mean that he was necessarily providing an accurate apprehension or interpretation of the hidden realities of his being or the Universe. In fact, if Yogananda’s claims and descriptions comprised a unique and essentially idiosyncratic account of the nature of cosmic consciousness, we would have been inclined to be much more circumspect in our consideration of them. I suspect that we would have regarded his account as being, perhaps, nothing more than a curious anomaly, but hardly an experience which was relevant to the study of psychology. But the simple fact is that the nature of his experience, the realities that he describes, and the interpretation he provides are all consistent with an extraordinary body of evidence and credible theoretical explanations drawn from mystical and esoteric sources throughout human history. Furthermore, there are numerous instances of otherwise “ordinary” individuals experiencing transcendent states of higher consciousness in which they provide accounts that are remarkably consistent and congruent with aspects of Yogananda’s account and explanations. Consequently, Holmes and I came to regard Yogananda’s experience of cosmic consciousness to be of critical significance in studying the origins and nature of human consciousness.

How then do most modern scientists and psychologists—that is, those who adhere to and promote the dominant materialist theoretical

perspective—explain Yogananda’s experience or any experience of cosmic consciousness? Essentially, they have nothing meaningful to say about such experiences. Either they deny their reality or are tellingly silent about them. In the former case, Yogananda and those of his mystic ilk are dismissed by mainstream consciousness researchers and theorists as suffering from delusions and hallucinations that are the result of brain pathologies and culturally imposed expectations. Tellingly, the self-styled skeptics do so without ever appearing to have carefully examined the mystical and esoteric literature. But if, as Sir Arthur Eddington so elegantly stated, science “is the earnest attempt to put in order the facts of experience,” then

surely, if we wish to be truly “scientific” in our approach to the study of consciousness, we cannot dismiss or ignore these accounts of ‘the facts of experience’—no matter how incredible they might appear to be.

Without intending to sound self-aggrandizing, I would say that—in our own way—Christopher Holmes and I have spent the past 37 years attempting to further our understanding of the significance of Yogananda’s experience of cosmic consciousness and his explanation of it. In and of itself, that task has proven to be a remarkable undertaking; a journey of discovery which, while it has been astonishingly revealing and illuminating, continues to be mysterious and elusive. As in the best of mysteries, we have come to understand that the more we know, the more we recognize how little we know. As we already acquired an inchoate understanding of the esoteric/mystical claim—that *consciousness is light*—when we first read Yogananda’s autobiography, we were particularly intrigued by Yogananda’s

Time after time, people compared the Absolute to a radiant source of light of unimaginable intensity, though they emphasized that it also differed in some significant aspects from any forms of light that we know in the material world. To describe the Absolute as light entirely misses some of its essential characteristics, particularly the fact that it is also an immense and unfathomable field of consciousness endowed with infinite intelligence and creative power.

description of Creation dynamics consisting of an alteration of matter and Light. Similarly, we were fascinated by his declaration that the manifest physical Universe is composed of *tissues of light* which compose God’s body. We did not recognize nor even suspect the importance of what

Yogananda meant when he stated that he “cognized the centre of the empyrean as a point of intuitive perception in my heart” and that, as such, he was saying that by knowing himself in the higher dimensions of his own heart, he was at one with the Universe and God. Further, we had no idea that “the point within his heart” might be construed as a zero point and as such, would provide a startling ex-

ample of how man is “a microcosm of the macrocosm.” As our reading of the account preceded any familiarity with the emerging “holographic paradigm”—based on the work of Karl Pribram and David Bohm—we were certainly not aware of the significance of the holographic reality which Yogananda was describing: wherein the entire Universe exists, somehow, within its parts! And we certainly did not grasp the significance of his master’s claim that, while it is God’s spirit which sustains Creation, He “is transcendental and aloof in the blissful uncreated void beyond the worlds of vibratory phenomenon.” And yet, by diligently examining and studying esoteric and mystical doctrines for some 25 years, while attempting to compare them with modern physics, Holmes developed a theoretical model of consciousness in which each of these critical elements of Yogananda’s experience became central to his position.

Despite most academic psychologists’ reluctance to take seriously accounts of experiences

of cosmic consciousness and their staggering implications, there has certainly been no shortage of material which has addressed the importance of transcendent experiences. Recall that, in the first article in this series, I quoted William James' famous observation that our normal waking consciousness is but one but special type of consciousness, while all around it, there exist other forms of consciousness which, with the application of the requisite stimulus, reveal themselves in their entirety. Of course, in his seminal volume, *Cosmic Consciousness*,⁹ Maurice Bucke had undertaken a detailed examination of the transcendent/visionary experience. Nevertheless, during the first half of the twentieth century, academic experimental psychology—particularly, in the United States—was dominated by behaviorism; a school of thought which explicitly denied that consciousness was a legitimate topic of scientific study.

In the second article in this series, I presented an overview of Ken Wilber's account of the collapse of the traditional Great Chain/Nest of Being which led to what he termed "the disaster of modernity": wherein "reality" has been rudely reduced to the flatland of the material realm. As such, all conceptualizations of a hierarchy of consciousness have been dismissed and, in "the disqualified Universe," all interior dimensions of being have been deemed to be irrelevant. In this article, my aim is to suggest that transcendent/visionary states of consciousness are not only real—and as such, provide the evidentiary basis for the reality of the Great Nest—but are of the utmost significance in revealing that humans are multi-dimensional beings existing in a multi-dimensional Universe. The consistent, profound and coherent nature of the higher states of consciousness—which arise as a result of an astonishing variety of circumstances—constitute a body of evidence which, I believe, reveals that the entire assumptive framework of modern materialism is fundamentally incorrect and, consequently, its explanatory power is severely limited. In keeping with Wilber's perspective, I am not suggesting that materialism and the reductionistic methodological approaches, through which it is typically pursued, are wrong, per se; nor am I claiming that knowledge apprehended within that framework is invalid. On the contra-

ry, such knowledge is highly practical and certainly valid—as long as it's explanatory limitations are recognized. I am arguing that the transcendent/visionary experience reveals that the materialists are incorrect in assuming that knowledge which is apprehended through sensory processes (and their extension through instrumentation) is *comprehensive* or that, eventually, it will be. Quite simply, there exists overwhelming evidence documenting the need to go beyond "the reach of the senses" and recognize higher dimensional psychological and cosmological realities in formulating a comprehensive explanatory framework. The material realm is but one level in the Great Nest of Being and establishes both its limits and those of any material explanation. In the next article in this series, I will address these theoretical issues in detail; my purpose in this article is to provide an overview of some of the evidence which I regard as revealing materialism's limits and limitations.

Aldous Huxley on the Visionary Experience

In a speech delivered at the XIV International Congress of Applied Psychology in 1961, Aldous Huxley examined the "Visionary Experience" and provided an extremely interesting commentary on the nature and significance of light in such experiences.¹⁰ Describing light as the "highest common factor" of the visionary experience, Huxley notes that light can be both good and bad, and further divides the former into two types. The first, "undifferentiated light," refers to experiences of everything being flooded with light; the second, "differentiated light," denotes experiences in which objects, people, and landscapes seem to be "impregnated and shining with their own light."

Huxley asserts that the experience of undifferentiated light tends to be that associated with the "fullblown mystical experience." In such states, he says, there is a transcendence of the subject-object relationship: a sense of union with others and with the universe in general. Furthermore, there is also a sense of the ultimate "allrightness of the universe"—that despite all the horror, the pain and suffering of the world, there is a higher level of meaning in which somehow everything is, in some way,

all right. As he points out, it is characteristic of the visionary experience that things which are incomprehensible in the subjectivity of normal waking consciousness—for example, all sorts of tales and aphorisms from scripture—become perfectly comprehensible in the mystical apprehension of higher levels of consciousness. A second feature of this mystical experience of undifferentiated light is described as “gratitude for the privilege of being alive.” This is yet another example, Huxley explains, of the numerous phrases in mystical literature which, while incomprehensible to our normal waking consciousness, are profoundly meaningful in the mystical and visionary state.

Of course, religious literature contains numerous examples of how “seeing the light” is an integral aspect of awakening. Huxley cites St. Paul on the road to Damascus, the explosion of light which awakened Mohammed and was so intense that it made him faint, and the tremendous light which Plotinus experienced several times. However, he notes that these wonderful, transformative experiences are much more common than we suppose—as Raynor Johnson documents in his book, *Watcher on the Hills: A Study of Some Mystical Experiences of Ordinary People*.¹¹ In this vein, Huxley quotes from a letter he had received from a woman, in her sixties, who described an experience she had when she was a schoolgirl:

“I was a girl of 15 or 16, I was in the kitchen toasting bread for tea and suddenly on a dark November afternoon the whole place was flooded with light, and for a minute by clock time I was immersed in this, and I had a sense that in some unutterable way the universe was all right. This has affected me for the rest of my life, I have lost all fear of death, I have a passion for light, but I am in no way afraid of death, because this light experience has been a kind of conviction to me that everything *is* all right in some way.”¹²

There is a great deal in these mystical experiences of undifferentiated light which challenges the orthodoxy of modern psychological and scientific thought. These experiences, in which people are illuminated and transformed, are

simply incomprehensible and inexplicable to the materialist; as such, the materialist typically feels entitled to discard these experiences as being irrelevant to the study of psychology and consciousness. And yet, I would suggest that anyone examining the accounts of these experiences with an open mind must allow that their status as enigmas within the domain of the materialist approach is so troublesome and provocative as to call into question its essential validity.

If, in trying to make sense of these “visionary experiences of undifferentiated light,” a materialist *cum* rationalist/skeptic was able to resist the reflexive urge to describe them as being “nothing but ...,” he or she would most likely settle for “explaining” them as “hallucinations” or “perceptual distortions.” But if this were a valid interpretation, would it not follow logically that the people experiencing these radical, spontaneous alterations of their perceptions and violations of their normal waking state’s parameters would be, at the very least, bewildered, and more likely, terrified that they were in the throes of some mysterious physical or emotional malady? Would their most immediate priority not be to ask, “What is happening to me?” Further, would not their priority be to seek an immediate restoration of their normal state of consciousness and perceptual faculties? Would they not be disturbed and apprehensive that these experiences might recur?

That protocol does describe the reactions of those unfortunate enough to suffer a psychotic episode, but it has nothing to do with the responses of those who experience Huxley’s undifferentiated light. Instead of being alarmed or frightened by what is happening to them, people reporting these visionary experiences react with awe, wonder, and a reverence for what they regard as the unmistakably benign nature of these extraordinary occurrences. To have this mystical experience of “seeing the light” is profoundly moving and meaningful. Those who do so undergo a fundamental transformation in their understanding of themselves, and the meaning of their lives and the Universe. *People lose their fear of death*. Think of that! What is it in this mystical visionary experience

rience of light which effects such a radical and enduring alteration of people's most deeply rooted and seemingly intractable attitudes and beliefs—especially, the essentially instinctual fear of death?

It is tempting to assume that this mystical experience of illumination is, for those who have followed a spiritual or mystical path, the culmination of their attempts to cultivate consciousness. While that would hardly “explain” or otherwise “do away” with the transformative quality of these experiences, it would place them in a context providing some meaningful sense of continuity. One might argue that such people were somehow unconsciously constructing a reality which was fulfilling an expectation. But then how is one to explain or understand the many spontaneous instances of these visionary experiences and their extraordinary influences on people's lives? As Huxley notes, Raynor Johnson's work suggests that this uncultivated mystical experience of light is much more common than is typically supposed. However, insofar as there does not exist any social structure or process, within technologically developed cultures, which might accommodate or encourage reports of such anomalous experiences of altered states of consciousness, a reasonable and rational individual would be wise to exercise extreme caution in discussing such extraordinary events. The extent to which our health and therapeutic agencies are predisposed to judge any experience of an altered state of consciousness or perception of non-consensual reality as indicating dysfunction and disease underlines the extent to which the dominance of scientific materialism has contributed to an ever-more constrained and rigid definition of the parameters of legitimate and meaningful human experience. Having said all that, the question remains: what is the nature of this mysterious experience of light which exerts such extraordinary influence on people's lives?

In attempting to explicate the nature of this light, Huxley makes an important observation about the intriguing relation between the religious and psychological significance of this ineffable light. He notes that while light is the predominant divine symbol in all religions, this

symbol represents a psychological fact. Thus, “the light of the world, the inner light, enlightenment, the clear light of the void ...” are all symbols derived from this “quasi-sensory experience of light.”¹³ This idea, that the universality of light as a religious symbol is predicated upon a psychological fact, is yet another anomaly about which scientific materialism remains mute. And it must remain so. For this “quasi-sensory experience of light” reveals the materialist paradigm's boundaries, and in doing so, challenges its ultimate validity. There is nothing in the assumptive framework or the essential postulates of the materialist approach which allows for this type or degree of manifestation of meaning. Therefore, the materialist is forced to reckon with the disturbing complexity of the visionary experience of light by ignoring its ubiquity and denying its meaning. Moreover, when one connects the significance of light in the experience of mystical revelation with Yogananda's claims—that to acquire self-knowledge is to know oneself as a “body of light,” and thereby to identify with the “structural essence of Creation”—the importance of focusing on the nature of this mysterious light is underscored. Is this recurring identification of light, as being the definitive aspect of exalted visionary states, merely a grand coincidence? Is this “seeing the light” nothing more than a concomitant of these anomalous and enigmatic experiences? Or is the repeated and consistent description of light in the experience of mystical vision and awakening a sign that even blind men might read?

Stanislav Grof's Holotropic States

While the mainstream of modern psychology has remained inured to the significance of the visionary experience, there have been some notable exceptions—such as the work of the humanist psychologist, Abraham Maslow, who addressed the nature and significance of what he termed “the peak experience” in his landmark work, *Religions, Values, and Peak Experiences*.¹⁴ Before they achieved notoriety and dismissal from the faculty of the Harvard Psychology department, Timothy Leary and Richard Alpert (aka Baba Ram Dass) had conducted serious research into the

potential for LSD to engender therapeutic and spiritually transforming visionary experiences.¹⁵ John Lilly, perhaps best known for his research involving dolphins, boldly explored the visionary/transcendent experience by experimenting with psychedelic drugs, as well as sensory diminishment in flotation tanks.¹⁶ The area of transpersonal psychology—which was pioneered by such figures as Charles Tart, Robert Ornstein, Arthur Deikman, and Stanislav Grof—furthered the work initiated by Maslow by attempting to apply scientific rigour to the examination and exploration of a variety of esoteric/mystical methods, disciplines, and practices.

Stanislav Grof, a Czechoslovakian psychiatrist who relocated to the United States in 1967, is one of the most accomplished investigators of visionary/transcendent states of consciousness. In his 1998 book, *The Cosmic Game*,¹⁷ Grof presented an intriguing summary of some 40 years of study of what he termed “*holotropic states of consciousness*.” Grof coined that term because he believed that the expression “non-ordinary states of consciousness” was too broad in identifying the states in which he was interested. Holotropic literally means “moving in the direction of wholeness” or “oriented toward wholeness.” The use of the term, Grof says, is to suggest that, in our ordinary waking state of consciousness, we are not really whole: “we are fragmented and identify with only a small fraction of who we really are.”¹⁸ In holotropic states, Grof states that feelings of unity—with other people, nature, the Universe, and God—are common, as well as sequences of spiritual death and re-birth. These experiences can uncover what may be memories from previous incarnations, lead to encounters with archetypal beings and mythological domains, and open communications with disembodied entities. These states also include out-of-body experiences during which the disembodied consciousness maintains the capacity of seeing accurately not only the immediate environment of the body, but remote locations.

Holotropic states are characterized by perceptual changes in all sensory modalities, intense and unusual emotions, and profound alterations in thought processes. While conscious-

ness is fundamentally altered, it is not pathological or impaired. In such states, Grof states that “we experience intrusions of other dimensions of existence that can be very intense and even overwhelming”¹⁹ The senses are magnified and intensified, often involving visions of various aspects of nature, the cosmos, and even mythological realms. Grof describes the emotional spectrum of holotropic states as ranging from ecstatic rapture and heavenly bliss to abysmal terror, despair, overpowering anger, and other such forms of extreme suffering. Regarding intellectual functioning, he states that, while not impaired, the intellect operates in a fundamentally different fashion from its typical functioning. In holotropic states, people can be flooded with profound information and psychological insights. Grof states that: “By far the most interesting insights that become available in holotropic states revolve around philosophical, metaphysical, and spiritual issues.”²⁰

Grof notes that the sources of these experiences are numerous and that there exist a variety of ancient and aboriginal techniques—that which he terms “technologies of the sacred”—for inducing such experiences. Such methods as drumming, rhythmic dancing, social and sensory isolation, fasting, sleep deprivation, purgation, and the ritual use of psychedelic plants and substances have been employed, in various cultures throughout human history, to induce holotropic states. In addition, he explains that the esoteric traditions have developed such disciplines and methods as yoga, meditation, ascetic practices, conscious prayer, chanting, and dancing as technologies of the sacred. However, Grof stresses that, independently of any of these techniques, holotropic experiences can occur spontaneously—without any identifiable cause and against the will of the individual involved. He and Christina Grof, his wife, argue that these experiences are often psychospiritual crises or spiritual emergencies, and that they should be treated as such, rather than as manifestations of psychiatric illness demanding pharmacological intervention. If recognized as such and supported by experienced facilitators, he argues, “... episodes of this kind can result in psychosomatic healing, spiritual opening, positive personality

transformation, and consciousness evolution.”²¹

Grof stated that he had personally conducted over 4,000 psychedelic sessions (and had access to colleagues’ records of 2,000 sessions) with such substances as LSD, psilocybine, mescaline, dipropyl-tryptamine (DPT), and methylene-diox-amphetamine (MDA)—mostly with psychiatric patients suffering from a variety of emotional and psychosomatic disorders, but also with cancer patients. In addition, Stanislav and Christina Grof have conducted over 30,000 holotropic breathwork sessions: consisting of breathing exercise workshops designed to engender transcendent states of consciousness. Based on his records of his pharmacological and breathing sessions, Grof came to what he regarded as a startling conclusion:

...what emerged from these accounts of holotropic states was a comprehensive and logically consistent alternative to the understanding of human nature and of existence that has been formulated by materialist science and that represents the official ideology of the Western industrial civilization.²²

Those experiencing holotropic states discover what Grof terms “an ensouled cosmos”: a Universe that is “created and permeated by superior cosmic intelligence.”²³ In addition, he argues that they overturn the conventional psychological assumptions and beliefs regarding the potential of the human psyche and our perceptual limits. In order to accommodate the experiences of the holotropic state, he seeks to radically redefine the cartography of the psyche by positing the existence of two significant domains. The first, he terms “the *perinatal*”—due to its association with birth—which he describes as being “a repository of intense physical sensations and emotions linked to the trauma of birth ...”²⁴ The second domain is “the *transpersonal*” which refers to its defining characteristic as being a transcending of “the usual limitations of the body and the ego.”²⁵ Grof explains that transpersonal experiences—which can involve accessing the collective unconscious or experiential identification with various aspects of nature (including people, plants, and animals) and the cosmos—“vastly expand the sense of personal identity by in-

cluding elements of the external world and other dimensions of reality.”²⁶ Records of the perinatal and transpersonal experiences document and reveal, in Grof’s opinion, that the boundaries that separate the human psyche and the cosmos—that which most scientists and psychologists take for granted—are “ultimately arbitrary” and can be transcended. He writes:

When we have experienced to sufficient depth these dimensions that are hidden to our everyday perception, we typically undergo profound changes in our understanding of existence and of the nature of reality. The most fundamental metaphysical insight we obtain is the realization that the universe is not an autonomous system that has evolved as a result of mechanical interplay of material particles. We find it impossible to take seriously the basic assumption of materialistic science, which asserts that the history of the universe is merely the history of evolving matter. We have directly experienced the divine, sacred, or numinous dimensions of existence in a very profound and compelling way.²⁷

Experiences of the Divine

At the risk of doing a disservice to the breadth and depth of the content of *The Cosmic Game*, I wish to focus on some of Grof’s comments regarding his subjects’ experiences of the Divine. In searching reports from those whom he characterizes as having experienced “the ultimate frontiers of the human spirit”²⁸—involving encounters with “the supreme principle” in the Universe—Grof says that people who claimed to have experienced the Absolute provided descriptions that were “highly abstract and strikingly similar.”²⁹ He says that they evidenced a remarkable consistency in describing their experience of the Supreme. They also agreed that the experience transcended “all the limitations of the analytical mind, all rational categories, all the constraints of ordinary logic.”³⁰ Grof explains that:

... Time after time, people compared the Absolute to a *radiant source of light of unimaginable intensity*, though they emphasized that it also differed in some signifi-

cant aspects from any forms of light that we know in the material world. *To describe the Absolute as light entirely misses some of its essential characteristics, particularly the fact that it is also an immense and unfathomable field of consciousness endowed with infinite intelligence and creative power.*³¹ [emphasis added]

Grof's emphasis on differentiating between the light of the electromagnetic spectrum and the supernal Light of the Absolute underlines the importance of understanding the quantum discontinuity between the material realm and the higher-dimensional realities experienced in holotropic states. The Light of the higher dimensions is experienced as being not only of unimaginable intensity (yet, paradoxically, not painful or blinding), but also as an "unfathomable field of consciousness." That is precisely what Yogananda described in his account of cosmic consciousness; he also described the Light as the creative source informing and manifesting in the material realm. Continuing, Grof explains that this Supreme cosmic principle can be experienced in two distinct ways: one in which there is a dissolving of all personal boundaries in the Light—the loss of all sense of a discrete identity—and the second, in which there continues to be a continuing sense of separateness from the Divine. As Grof says, the mystical literature is replete with accounts of both types of experiences of the Divine. In the former case, he cites the Sufi analogy: "Just as a moth flies into the flame and becomes one with it, so do we merge with the Divine."³² By contrast, he points out that both St. Teresa of Avila and Rumi, the great Sufi poet, maintain a sense of separation from God—as evidenced by their references to Him as "the Beloved."

In attempting to describe essentially ineffable experiences, Grof says that those experiencing these transcendent states explain the utter inadequacy of words in attempting to convey their realization of the supreme principle. Even the word, "God," they maintain, has been distorted or trivialized by mainstream religions and cultures. Similarly, such terms as "Absolute Consciousness" and "Universal Mind" seem to be "hopelessly inadequate to convey

the immensity and shattering impact of such an encounter."³³ In the face of the Divine, words and the structure of our language, which are rooted in our normal waking consciousness, are "painfully inappropriate tools to describe its nature and dimensions, particularly to those who have not had it."³⁴

Having stipulated these qualifications, Grof provides the following report from Robert, a thirty-seven year old psychiatrist, who felt that he had experienced the ultimate reality. Robert's experience, which began suddenly and without warning, led to a dramatic loss of contact with the surrounding world and a progressive disconnection from all sense of his identity and the referents of his normal reality:

... my only reality was a mass of swirling energy of immense proportions that seemed to contain all of Existence in an entirely abstract form. *It had the brightness of myriads of suns, yet it was not on the same continuum with any light I knew from everyday life. It seemed to be pure consciousness, intelligence, and creative energy transcending all polarities.* It was infinite and finite, divine and demonic, terrifying and ecstatic, creative and destructive ... all of that and much more. I had no concept, no categories for what I was witnessing. I could not maintain a sense of separate existence in the face of such a force. My ordinary identity was shattered and dissolved; I became one with the Source. Time lost any meaning whatsoever.

In retrospect, I believe I must have experienced the Dharmakaya, the Primary Clear Light, that according to the Tibetan Book of the Dead, the Bardo Thödol, appears at the moment of death.³⁵ [emphasis added]

Further complicating and deepening the mystery of the experience of the Divine are those accounts in which realization of the supreme principle is described as having no specific content. These are experiences of "the Cosmic Emptiness and Nothingness"—that which is referred to, in the mystical literature, as "the Void." Grof explains that:

When we encounter the Void, we feel that it is primordial emptiness of cosmic proportions and relevance. We become pure con-

sciousness aware of this absolute nothingness; however, at the same time, we have a paradoxical sense of essential fullness. This cosmic vacuum is also a plenum, since nothing seems to be missing from it; it seems to comprise all of existence in a potential form. ...

The Void transcends the usual categories of time and space. Some people call it Supracosmic and Metacosmic, indicating that this primordial emptiness and nothingness appears to be the principle that underlies the phenomenal world as we know it and, at the same time, is supraordinated to it. This metaphysical vacuum, pregnant with potential for everything there is, appears to be the cradle of all being, the ultimate source of existence. The creation of all phenomenal worlds is then the realization and concretization of its pre-existing potentialities.³⁶

Grof argues that, after experiencing the spiritual dimensions of reality, the materialist's contentions—that the Universe, life, and consciousness are nothing but the result of material processes without any influence of a superior creative intelligence—appear to be absurd and untenable. Indeed, he argues that the effects of apprehending other realities as a result of a visionary experience are so profound that they transform those who experience them; compelling them to alter dramatically their perspectives on the nature of themselves and the Universe. Thus, Grof makes the following dramatic assertion:

I have not yet met a single individual who has had a deep experience of the transcendental realms and continues to subscribe to the worldview of Western materialistic science. The development is quite independent of the level of intelligence, type and degree of education, and professional credentials of the individuals involved.³⁷ [emphasis added]

Again, Grof's findings are consistent with Huxley's claims regarding the transformative nature of the visionary experience: those who have seen the light experience a radical and permanent alteration of their most basic beliefs about the nature of human existence. If, as the

old saw would have it, "there are no atheists in foxholes," it appears to be equally true that there are no materialists amongst those who have been illuminated.

Life After Life ... And Beyond

Within the last forty years, a significant body of evidence has arisen—inadvertently and from an entirely unlikely source—which is consistent with and, thus, corroborates Huxley's characterization of the visionary experience and Grof's concept of holotropic states of consciousness. The advances in cardiac resuscitation technology and associated medical procedures have resulted in numerous instances and subsequent startling accounts of the Near-Death Experience ("NDE").³⁸ My purpose in discussing the NDE in this article is not to debate whether or not the experience of being conscious, when one has been observed to be clinically dead, is "real." I would submit that anyone examining the NDE research, with an open-mind and a truly skeptical attitude, must conclude that the extraordinary nature of the experience has been reliably, repeatedly, and consistently reported and, therefore, *is* real. Further, I believe that NDE research constitutes compelling evidence, which leads to the heretical, but unavoidable conclusion that human beings are capable of experiencing consciousness separately from their physical bodies and independently of their brain's physiological processes. Finally, these experiences involve the existence of higher states of consciousness in which subtle dimensions of reality are apprehended. I would also point out that these higher states of consciousness and the subtle realms that are experienced are entirely consistent with esoteric and mystical doctrines. Accordingly, I regard the NDE research as being the most important collection of data available to contemporary consciousness researchers. While skeptics routinely proclaim that extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence, the NDE literature—in which thousands upon thousands of cases have been accumulated and critically examined—have more than satisfied the criteria of extraordinary evidence. Indeed, it is clear that the massive evidence documenting the NDE demands that the burden of explanation

has shifted. It is the skeptics who must provide a truly extraordinary materialist explanation to account for this astonishing body of evidence; a challenge which, to date, they have repeatedly and thoroughly failed to meet.

As a result of Dr. Raymond Moody's pioneering work, *Life After Life*,³⁹ and the efforts of several other prominent researchers who have investigated this intriguing phenomenon, there is now widespread awareness amongst the general public, in most post-technological societies, of the standard NDE protocol. In such instances, those who have "died"—as evidenced by unconsciousness due to anoxia (lack of oxygen to the brain) resulting from the arrest of breathing and/or blood circulation—report that they continue to be aware of themselves, while often relating that they have existed outside of their bodies and observed the medical personnel's efforts to revive them. They then describe: traveling down a tunnel; emerging into a brilliant light which they perceive to be a loving source of higher intelligence; encountering deceased relatives and friends; undergoing "life reviews" that often involve not only a comprehensive and utterly coherent re-examination of the events of their own lives but also include an understanding of their effects on others and their reactions; and communicating with "beings of light" who sometimes present the "deceased" with the choice of returning to live in the physical body or remaining on this subtle plane. Collectively, these accounts challenge the materialist's fundamental assumption regarding the nature of human consciousness: that it is produced by the brain's activities and is, therefore, coterminous with the death of the physical body.

NDE research constitutes compelling evidence, which leads to ... the conclusion that human beings are capable of experiencing consciousness separately from their physical bodies and independently of their brain's physiological processes. ... These experiences involve the existence of higher states of consciousness in which subtle dimensions of reality are apprehended. ... These higher states of consciousness and the subtle realms that are experienced are entirely consistent with esoteric and mystical doctrines.

nous with the death of the physical body.

In *Life After Life*, Moody provided an extraordinary body of anecdotal evidence regarding the NDE. Interestingly, he began his work on the NDE with the intention of "explaining away" the NDE. He admits that, until he examined the NDE phenomenon in detail, he would

have found such stories incredible and, accordingly, would have dismissed them out of hand. However, as he accumulated evidence about what he discovered to be a startlingly common experience, he began to realize that he could neither dismiss nor explain this phenomenon. In light of his own conversion, Moody challenged the skeptic "to poke around a bit for himself"—claiming that many who have done so "have come to share my bafflement over these events."⁴⁰

Moody noted that, in his research, he had identified twelve elements that recurred in accounts of the NDE. However, he cautioned that he had not found any case in which a subject had identified all the elements as being a part of his or her experience; similarly, he stated that there was no single element which every one of his subjects reported. (Subsequently, Moody reported that he had encountered cases in which all twelve elements were present.) Repeatedly, Moody's twelve elements have been confirmed by numerous researchers over the past 35 years. The following summary and description of the elements are derived from Pim van Lommel's discussion of them in his recent book, *Consciousness Beyond Life: The Science of the Near-Death Experience*.⁴¹ The elements consist of:

1. the ineffability of the experience; it is

- not reducible to or explicable in terms of ordinary language;
2. a feeling of peace and quiet; the pain is gone;
 3. the awareness of being dead, sometimes followed by a noise;
 4. an Out-of-Body Experience; from a position outside and above one's body, the individual witnesses his own resuscitation or operation;
 5. a dark space, people are pulled toward a small pinpoint of light;
 6. the perception of an unearthly environment; a dazzling landscape with beautiful colours, gorgeous flowers and, sometimes, music;
 7. meeting and communicating with deceased persons, mostly relatives;
 8. seeing a brilliant light or "a being of light"; experiencing complete acceptance and unconditional love and gaining access to a deep knowledge and wisdom;
 9. the panoramic life review; seeing one's entire life flash before one;
 10. the preview or flash forward: having the impression that one is witnessing a part of one's life that is yet to come;
 11. the perception of a border; being aware that, if one crosses this border or limit, one will be unable to return to one's body and life in the physical Universe; and
 12. the conscious return to the body, accompanied by great disappointment at having something so beautiful taken away.

Throughout the NDE literature, there are numerous accounts of people experiencing a brilliant supernal Light. The Light is sensed as being a presence, which communicates unconditional love and/or transmits extraordinary knowledge. As with Grof's descriptions of holotropic states, the Light is described as constituting a field of infinite consciousness.

Those who have undergone such advanced NDEs provide reports that are remarkably similar to Huxley's characterization of those who have had what he termed "the full-blown mystical experience." Such individuals are transformed by the experience of being illuminated: they lose their fear of death; they develop a passion for knowledge and knowing; and they acquire a deep gratitude for the privilege of being alive. They undergo a dramatic and enduring transformation in their values: which results in them recognizing the importance of serving others, as well as regarding spirituality as being far more important than material concerns and egoistic satisfaction.

Although Moody's research and that of his fellow NDE pioneer, Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, were intriguing, they were anecdotal. Accordingly, Dr. Kenneth Ring, an American psychologist, undertook research of the NDE with the intention of categorizing and interpreting the phenomena within a scientific framework. In his 1980 book, *Life at Death*,⁴² Ring stated that his research had affirmed Moody's claim that any researcher who chose to study the NDE "sympathetically and diligently will find that there is ample case material."⁴³ Further, Ring's investigation yielded a striking correspondence with the twelve elements that Moody had delineated in his analysis of the NDE. For more than 35 years, Ring has continued to carry out pioneering research into the NDE. He also provided a major impetus for the systematic study of the NDE by establishing the International Association for Near-Death Studies ("IANDS") to investigate this extraordinary phenomenon and to attempt to grasp its significance.

As a transpersonal psychologist, who was already familiar with a great deal of the anecdotal NDE material, Ring's interest and his enthusiasm for continuing research is, perhaps, not surprising. However, during approximately the same time as he was conducting his initial study, Dr. Michael Sabom, an American cardiologist at Emory University, undertook his own study for the purpose of debunking the NDE. With his colleague, Sarah Kreutziger, he took up Moody's challenge to "poke around" and, much to his surprise, discovered that the

results of interviews carried out with patients who had survived a near-death crisis were consistent with Moody's results. In 1982, Sabom published his book *Recollections of Death*,⁴⁴ reporting his investigation of 116 near-deaths survivors. His results were consistent with those which Ring had independently gathered and reported. In his investigation, Sabom placed particular emphasis on attempting to corroborate evidence that patients adduced regarding their auditory and visual perceptions while they were "out of their bodies." He concluded that there was compelling evidence that those experiencing NDEs were capable of providing accurate and verifiable information regarding the events that transpired while they were clinically dead.

Consciousness Beyond Life

During the past 30 years, there has been a veritable explosion of NDE research. As the reality of the NDE has become increasingly public, resistance to reporting such experiences has become less formidable—although the potentially negative consequences of doing so are certainly substantial and should be regarded with caution. The cover of the October 15, 2012 edition of *Newsweek* magazine featured the claim from Eben Alexander, an American neurosurgeon, that "Heaven is Real."⁴⁵ In his recent book, *Proof of Heaven*,⁴⁶ Dr. Alexander recounts his extraordinary experiences of higher-dimensional realities—after having contracted viral meningitis and going into a coma. Based on his transformative experience, Alexander provides the following pointed summary of the inadequacy of the materialist/skeptical position on the NDE:

Like many other scientific skeptics, *I refused to even review the data* relevant to these phenomena. *I prejudged the data, and those providing it*, because my limited perspective failed to provide the foggiest notion of how such things might actually happen. *Those who assert that there is no evidence for the phenomena indicative of extended consciousness, in spite of overwhelming evidence to the contrary, are willfully ignorant.* They believe that they know the truth without needing to look at the facts.⁴⁷ [emphasis added]

In 2010, Dr. Pim van Lommel, a Dutch cardiologist, published the English version of his book, *Consciousness Beyond Life*, which represents perhaps the most comprehensive examination of NDE research, as well as presenting significant theoretical commentary as to how such research impacts scientists' understanding of and approach to the study of consciousness.⁴⁸ Van Lommel had begun his NDE research in 1986: when he began to ask all the patients at his clinic, who had undergone resuscitation, whether they could recall anything of the period during which they were being resuscitated. He writes that: "I was more than a little surprised to hear, with the space of two years, twelve reports of such near-death experience among just over fifty cardiac arrest survivors."⁴⁹ Van Lommel says that he had not been open to such reports because, according to medical knowledge, "it is impossible to experience consciousness when the heart has stopped beating."⁵⁰ He adds that his entire education had taught him that there is "a reductionist and materialist explanation for everything."⁵¹ Until he began to investigate NDEs, van Lommel says that he "had always accepted this as indisputably true."⁵²

After his interest had been piqued by the surprisingly positive results he had obtained from his preliminary study of the NDE, van Lommel joined with Ruud van Wees and Vincent Meijers—psychologists who specialized in NDEs—to conduct the first large-scale "prospective" study of the NDE. As van Lommel explains, all of the early NDE research shared the same methodological shortcoming: the studies were "retrospective." The data was based on interviews with people who responded to advertisements, articles, television and radio broadcasts seeking accounts of NDEs.⁵³ While the information gained from such studies is certainly valuable, it also presents problems with respect to reliability—as researchers cannot determine what distinguishes those who respond to the request to participate in the research from those who do not. By contrast, a "prospective" NDE study involves "consecutive patients with a predefined diagnosis within days of their coma or cardiac arrest and ask them whether they have any memories of the period of unconsciousness."⁵⁴ Van Lommel

and his colleagues undertook a prospective, longitudinal study: wherein the subjects consisted of consecutive cardiac arrest survivors drawn from ten Dutch hospitals, who were followed for up to 8 years. The study examined the question as to whether “the common life changes that are reported after an NDE were the result of surviving a cardiac arrest or whether these changes were caused by the NDE itself.”⁵⁵ For every 100 successfully resuscitated patients included in the study, at least 200 died of cardiac arrest in the same period. All the patients who remained alive were interviewed—after 2 and 8 years—in order to determine the nature of life changes, if any, that followed after the NDE. A control group consisted of resuscitated patients who had not had an NDE, but were matched for age and sex with those who had.

The study, which Van Lommel and his colleagues carried out, was published in the December 2001 issue of the prestigious British medical journal, *The Lancet*. They reported that the percentages of the subjects experiencing the moderate, deep, and very deep NDEs—only 12 % in total—was much lower than the results of retrospective studies. Van Lommel attributes this finding to the prospective nature of the study, and the fact that the patients were much older than those typically studied. He reports that he and his colleagues were particularly surprised to find that *medical factors failed to explain the occurrence of an NDE*. He also notes that only a small percentage of those involved in the study had an NDE in which they reported an enhanced consciousness. As van Lommel says, if this enhanced consciousness was attributable to a physiological cause, such as oxygen deficiency—an “explanation” which skeptics frequently adduce as the material basis of the NDE—then it would follow that *all the patients in their study should have experienced an NDE*. In addition, van Lommel adds that psychological explanations were not applicable because the onset of the cardiac arrest was, for most patients, so sudden that they failed to notice it.

In *Consciousness Beyond Life*, van Lommel reviews, in great detail, the various psychological and physiological theories that have been

put forth by materialists. He concludes that none of them:

... explain the experience of an enhanced consciousness, with lucid thoughts, emotions, memories from earliest childhood, visions of the future, and possibilities of perception from a position outside and above the body. They also lack an adequate explanation for the fact that *everything experienced during the NDE appears more vivid and real than what happens during everyday working consciousness. The fact that an NDE is accompanied by accelerated thought and access to greater than ever wisdom remains inexplicable. Current scientific knowledge also fails to explain how all these NDE elements can be experienced at a moment when, in many people, brain function has been seriously impaired. There appears to be an inverse relationship between the clarity of consciousness and the loss of brain function.*⁵⁶ [emphasis added]

As van Lommel says, conventional scientific wisdom is unequivocal: in the absence of brain activity, there can be no experience of consciousness of awareness. But as confounding as the NDE is in defying that understanding, things become that much more peculiar—insofar as those who undergo the NDE experience lucid consciousness, with what they regard as undeniably heightened intellectual and emotional functioning. But, then too, even if materialists were able to identify some wondrous physiological process that would produce these inexplicable experiences, they would still be left with the enormous problem of accounting for the extraordinary content and impact of the experiences. In addition, as van Lommel notes, there is no explanation, within contemporary science and psychology, for the fact that people from all cultures and in all ages have reported NDEs. He also notes that there is no ready answer for the puzzling fact that, while a significant number of people do have NDEs, most people who are rendered unconscious by life-threatening crises do not report having an NDE. In other words, the more that we examine the NDE, the more mysterious it becomes.

Van Lommel notes that, since his group's study was published, there have been three additional prospective studies: Bruce Greyson's 2003 study of 116 patients; the 2001 British study of 63 patients which was carried out by Sam Parnia, an intensive care physician, and Peter Fenwick, a neuropsychiatrist; and a second British study of 39 patients which Penny Sartori, a senior intensive care nurse, conducted. All four studies reached the same conclusion which van Lommel summarizes:

...consciousness, with memories and occasional perception, can be experienced *during* a period of unconsciousness—that is, during a period when the brain shows no measurable activity and all brain functions, such as body reflexes, brain-stem reflexes, and respiration have ceased. It appears that at such a moment a lucid consciousness can be experienced independently of the brain and body.⁵⁷

Regarding the long-term effects of the NDE, van Lommel reports that a significant passage of time is often required in order for those who have had an NDE to integrate the pronounced changes in their views on a host of important subjects. In his study, the second interviews—which were conducted 8 years after the cardiac arrest—revealed that there was “a significant decrease in fear of death among people with an NDE and a significant increase in belief in an afterlife.”⁵⁸ In sum, van Lommel reports that:

... eight years after the cardiac arrest, all patients had changed in many respects: they had a greater interest in nature, the environment, and social justice; they showed more love and emotions; and they were more supportive and more involved in family life. Nonetheless, those who have experienced an NDE during their cardiac arrest remained significantly different. Specifically, they were *less afraid of death and had a stronger belief in a life after death*. They showed greater interest in spirituality and questions of meaning as well as a greater acceptance of and love for oneself and others. Likewise, they had a greater appreciation of ordinary things whereas their interest in possessions and power had decreased. People without an NDE showed a

marked decline in spirituality.”⁵⁹

Van Lommel claims that, in the past 50 years, more than 25 million people have had an NDE! He adds that recent research in the United States and Germany suggests that approximately 4.2 percent of the population report NDEs; in the United States that would mean 9 million people have reported an NDE!⁶⁰ Nevertheless, even these figures may well underestimate the prevalence of the experience due to the widespread dismissal of such reports amongst medical personnel and the frequency with which patients censor themselves for fear of ridicule or disparagement. While he readily acknowledges that consciousness remains “a huge mystery,” Van Lommel regards the NDE research—the frequency with which these experiences occur and the consistency of the recurring definitive elements—as providing the substantive basis for making fundamental changes in science's assumptions about and approaches to the study of consciousness. The experience of higher-dimensional realities and the singular nature of the states of consciousness involved—in the absence of any discernible evidence of brain functioning—lead van Lommel to conclude that consciousness is non-local:

Complete and endless consciousness is everywhere in a dimension that is not tied to time or place, where past, present, and future all exist and are accessible at the same time. This endless consciousness is always in and around us. We have no theories to prove or measure nonlocal space and nonlocal consciousness in the material world. The brain and the body merely function as an interface or relay station to receive part of our total consciousness and part of our total memories into our waking consciousness. ... Our consciousness transmits information to the brain and via the brain receives information from the body and the senses. The function of the brain can be compared to a transceiver; *our brain has a facilitating rather than a producing role; it enables the experience of consciousness*. There is also increasing evidence that consciousness has a direct effect on the function and anatomy of the

brain and the body, with DNA likely to play an important role.⁶¹ [emphasis added]

Finally, in what I regard as one of the most important statements in his wonderful book, van Lommel states that people who have had NDEs “have been my greatest teachers”: that his conversations with them and his study of the NDE has “changed my views on the meaning of life and death.”⁶² In this respect, he is putting forth an opinion that many NDE researchers—from Kubler-Ross and Moody ... to Ring and Sabom ... to Alexander—have expressed. Humbled by the extraordinary nature of the NDE and its profound and enduring impact on those who experience it, these researchers have not only demonstrated their intellectual integrity—by accepting that which their scientific training had taught them was impossible—but have recognized the importance of the experience for those who have been illuminated by their visionary experiences and their apprehension of higher-dimensional realities. In the true sense of scientific objectivity, van Lommel and other NDE researchers have overcome their prejudgment and opened their minds to what P.D. Ouspensky termed “system-destroying facts.” And, in doing so, they have embraced the incomparable opportunity of participating in what appears to promise a revolutionary breakthrough in human knowledge.

Some Concluding Remarks

The parallels between the accounts of those who have experienced visionary states of consciousness in life and those who have undergone the NDE are striking in terms of the content and their transformative effects. Despite my many years of interest in consciousness and my study of esoteric and mystical teachings, I confess that, for far too long, I underestimated the significance of the NDE literature. While I understood that NDE accounts essentially substantiated mystical and esoteric claims regarding the nature of consciousness and reality, I believe that I mistakenly assumed that I had a basic grasp of the significance of the NDE. In the past few years, I have read a dozen books on the NDE—which is, to say, that I have merely scratched the surface. Much

to my chagrin and delight, I have come to recognize how little I knew about the NDE, as well as how much there is to be learned from studying this amazing body of research. To a certain extent, I have found that reading NDE books is the intellectual equivalent of eating potato chips; once one begins, it is extremely difficult to stop. They seem to satisfy a certain hunger. On a more serious note, I will reiterate my contention that no one who professes to be interested in the study of consciousness can ignore the NDE research. Yet, within the mainstream of academic psychologists who study consciousness, I have been unable to discern any sign that anyone grants the NDE any consideration whatsoever! For example, in Susan Blackmore’s 2006 book, *Conversations on Consciousness*,⁶³ there is no mention of the NDE. The subtitle of Blackmore’s book is: *What the Best Minds Think about the Brain, Free Will, and What it Means to Be Human*. Although she converses with some twenty-one consciousness theorists and researchers—including such luminaries as Daniel Dennett, Francis Crick, David Chalmers, Patricia and Paul Churchland, Roger Penrose, John Searle, V.S. Ramachandran, and Richard Gregory—no one seems to have regarded the NDE to be of significant importance to include in their varied and far-ranging speculations on the nature of human consciousness. Similarly, the visionary/transcendent experience is also ignored. Of course, there are numerous psychologists who do regard the NDE as an essential subject in the study of consciousness. Unfortunately, it seems that, by adopting that perspective, one’s views are marginalized within academic psychology—wherein anything which is even mildly suggestive of being “mystical” is perfunctorily dismissed.

Based on my understanding of the subject, I believe that it is reasonable to assert that those reporting NDEs:

- (1) experience consciousness in the absence of any measurable physiological indices of life and/or brain activity;
- (2) experience themselves as self-conscious entities existing separate from the physical body such that they perceive their physical bodies from an external

perspective;

- (3) experience higher states in which the nature of knowing is dramatically altered and involves different speeds of information processing, distinct types of memory, and episodes of unitive consciousness in which one feels at one with the Universe and knows everything at once;
- (4) undergo transformative experiences in which they come to identify the over-whelming importance of love and knowledge;
- (5) directly and unequivocally experience supernal Light as higher consciousness and/or presences/beings;
- (6) encounter deceased loved ones and friends—including individuals they have not known in life but subsequently become identifiable—as well as spiritual entities and/or presences;
- (7) undergo life reviews that may include not only lucid recapitulations of one's entire existence—including one's own actions, thoughts, and feelings—but also direct apprehension of the effects of one's thoughts, feelings, and actions on others;
- (8) experience being given the choice of being able to return to one's body and current life or remaining in the after-life dimension; and
- (9) undergo dramatic and enduring transformations—post NDE—in terms of values, ethics, morals, beliefs, interests, and discernment of the nature, meaning, and purpose of existence.

It is obvious that even a cursory examination of each of these elements of the NDE demands significant discussion. In the next article, I propose to focus on: the experience of supernal Light; the dramatic alteration in knowing; the experience of unitive consciousness; the life review; and the recognition of the importance of love. I will argue that, while each of these topics poses significant challenges in terms of attempting to interpret and conceptualize the psychological dynamics involved, there are

important clues with the esoteric literature which may prove fruitful. At the very least, I would suggest that, in contrast to modern psychology and science, esoteric teachings provided a framework in which the NDE is readily accommodated. I will also cite van Lommel's explication of how the NDE defies current medical and scientific understanding of the brain, and leads him to conclude that consciousness must be conceptualized as being non-local. Finally, I will argue that the visionary/transcendent experience substantiates esoteric conceptualizations of humans as multi-dimensional beings existing in a multi-dimensional Universe.

¹ Paramahansa Yogananda, *Autobiography of a Yogi*, 1946 (Los Angeles: Self Realization Foundation, 1971).

² *Ibid.*, 148.

³ *Ibid.*, 148.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 148.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 148-149.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 149-150.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 150.

⁸ Christopher Holmes' series of articles, "The Origins and Nature of Human Consciousness," appears in *The Esoteric Quarterly* (Fall, 2010; Winter, 2010; Spring, 2011; Fall, 2011). His discussion of Yogananda's experience of cosmic consciousness appears in the Spring, 2011 issue, 48-51.

⁹ Maurice Bucke, *Cosmic Consciousness: A Study in the Evolution of the Human Mind*, 1901 (New York: EP Dutton And Company, Inc., 1969).

¹⁰ Aldous Huxley, "Visionary Experience," in John White, ed., *The Highest States of Consciousness* (New York: Anchor Books, 1972), 34-57.

¹¹ Raynor Johnson, *Watcher on the Hills: A Study of Some Mystical Experiences of Ordinary People* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1959).

¹² Aldous Huxley, "Visionary Experience," in John White, ed., *The Highest States of Consciousness*, 49.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 50.

¹⁴ Abraham Maslow, *Religions, Values, and Peak Experiences* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 1964).

¹⁵ For a very interesting history of Leary and Alpert's rise and fall at Harvard, see Don Lat-

- tin, *The Harvard Psychedelic Club* (New York: Harper One, 2010). Lattin examines the lives of Leary, Alpert, Houston Smith, and Andrew Weil—their divergent perspectives and priorities—during the halcyon days of the Harvard psychedelic experiment.
- 16 John Lilly, *Centre of the Cyclone: An Autobiography of Inner Space* (New York: Bantam Books, 1972).
- 17 Stanislav Grof, *The Cosmic Game: Explorations of the Frontiers of Human Consciousness* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1998). Grof has continued his work over the 15 years since this work was published. However, as my discussion is based on that work, references to his data sources are drawn from that account.
- 18 Ibid., 5.
- 19 Ibid., 6.
- 20 Ibid., 7.
- 21 Ibid., 8-9.
- 22 Ibid., 10.
- 23 Ibid., 11.
- 24 Ibid., 15.
- 25 Ibid., 15.
- 26 Ibid., 15.
- 27 Ibid., 16-17.
- 28 Ibid., 25.
- 29 Ibid., 26.
- 30 Ibid., 26.
- 31 Ibid., 26.
- 32 Ibid., 26.
- 33 Ibid., 27.
- 34 Ibid., 27.
- 35 Ibid., 28.
- 36 Ibid., 30.
- 37 Ibid., 254.
- 38 While there has been an extraordinary growth in the number of reported NDE cases, the phenomenon is hardly a recent development. Michael Talbot notes that, while the reported incidence of NDEs has increased dramatically with the advances in cardiac resuscitation treatments, there are numerous accounts of the phenomenon through history. Thus, he states that the NDE appears to be “a universal phenomenon.” Furthermore, he notes that NDEs have been described at great length in the eighth century *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, the 2,500 year old *Egyptian Book of the Dead*, as well as the works of Plato and Patanjali, amongst others. Talbot cites the work of Carol Zaleski, who states that medieval literature is filled with accounts of NDEs. Michael Talbot, *The Holographic Universe* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1992), 240.
- 39 Raymond A. Moody, Jr., *Life After Life*, 1975 (New York: Bantam, 1976).
- 40 Ibid., 6.
- 41 Pim van Lommel, *Consciousness Beyond Life: The Science of the Near-Death Experience* (New York: Harper One, 2010).
- 42 Kenneth Ring, *Life At Death: A Scientific Investigation of the Near-Death Experience* (New York: Quill, 1982)
- 43 Ibid., 32.
- 44 Michael Sabom, *Recollections of Death: A Medical Investigation* (New York: Harper & Row, 1982)
- 45 “My Proof of Heaven,” *Newsweek*, October 15, 2012, 28-32.
- 46 Eben Alexander, *Proof of Heaven: A Neurosurgeon’s Journey into the Afterlife* (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2012) 153.
- 47 Ibid.
- 48 Although I have read numerous books on the NDE, I do not profess to be an expert on the subject. Hence, I make my assessment of van Lommel’s book while readily acknowledging that I have not read many other works which are highly recommended by those whose judgment on these matters I trust.
- 49 Ibid., vii.
- 50 Ibid., vii.
- 51 Ibid., viii.
- 52 Ibid., viii.
- 53 Ibid., 137. Van Lommel explains that Sabom’s research was “partly prospective.”
- 54 Ibid., 15.
- 55 Ibid., 137.
- 56 Ibid., 137.
- 57 Ibid., 133.
- 58 Ibid., 149-149.
- 59 Ibid., 149.
- 60 Ibid., 9.
- 61 Ibid., xvii.
- 62 Ibid., xix.
- 63 Susan Blackmore, ed. *Conversations on Consciousness: What The Best Minds Think About The Brain, Free Will, And What It Means To Be Human* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).