

ALTERED CONSCIOUSNESS, NEAR-DEATH EPISODES, AND MYSTICAL EXPERIENCES

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Since time immemorial, humans in seeking pain relief have sometimes induced states of altered consciousness. There are well-known methods of achieving such states, which yogis and mystics have used for millennia. Induction of a hypnotic state is one method.¹ Others receive new perceptions through the use of psychedelic substances to connect sometimes with higher powers—for example, the magic mushroom devotees in Central America.²

Achieving an altered state of consciousness typically is associated with unusual perceptual experiences. This occurs when people are under the influence of certain drugs or specific anesthetics, and for those encountering near-death. What are we to make of these experiences, which may appear to transport the participants into the presence of superior beings and out-of-this-world places? Are they harmless sensory forays or even desirable experiences that can help human beings achieve spiritual enlightenment? Moreover, do such experiences prove that the soul is immortal and possesses a consciousness that continues apart from the physical body after death?

CLASSICAL HALLUCINOGENS

Many people around the world seek exceptional states of consciousness to escape from reality, while some religious people desire to experience more profound spiritual experiences. Some achieve these states by experimenting with psychedelics. The range of experiences recorded varies according to psychological factors within the participant, such as personality, life events, expectations, and mood at the time of entry to a session. Mystical-type experiences are the least frequently encountered.³

What are we to make of the claims of altered consciousness, near-death episodes, and after-death experiences? A current survey and a biblical critique.



► **MYSTICAL CONSCIOUSNESS.** The classical psychedelics are lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD), peyote, psilocybin, and dimethyltryptamine.⁴ Most psychedelic drugs fall into one of the three families of chemical compounds: tryptamines, phenethylamines, or lysergamides. The active compounds can have immediate and long-term adverse effects (e.g., nausea, panic, seizures) as well as long-term adverse effects (e.g., persistent psychosis, perception disorder, suicidal thoughts). Overdoses can be life threatening, with fatalities having been reported. The most significant psychological phenomena mentioned from ingesting these substances involve the following types of reactions⁵:

1. **An experience of unity.** Internal unity involves the loss of the usual impressions conveyed by the senses, that is, the loss of a feeling of individuality. It allows the individual to approach “an eternal dimension of life.” In the external aspect of unity, the participant tends to feel as though he or she became one with the object observed.
2. **A loss of objectivity.** Such encounters are considered real and not a delusion. The experience is thought to reveal truths not previously realized, such as the assumptions in Hindu and Buddhist psychology and cosmology.
3. **Feelings of transcendence.** Individuals sense that they are outside time and in a state close to infinity or eternity. They may even “see” their own death.
4. **A sense of sacredness.** The mystical consciousness achieved can give the user a deep sense of holiness and sacredness, as though he or she has stood before the Infinite or the Great Spirit. Overwhelming feelings of awe and reverence—even guilt, joy, love, blessedness, and peace—have been reported.
5. **Changes in attitude and behavior.** Full participation in mystical consciousness changes the experimenters’ attitudes toward themselves, others, life, personal worth, and their feelings about participation in such experiences. Faith in their ability to solve personal problems and realize their creative potential may be magnified.

► **NON-MYSTICAL CONSCIOUSNESS.** Spatial perceptual distortions often are noted. Color perceptions are intensified. Geometric, abstract, and constantly changing images may appear. When music is played, perceptions about colors and their intensity can change with the music. As the process advances, visions may have the individual walking through gardens, castles, and imaginary cities. Angels, dragons, gods, or mythologi-

cal creatures may be seen, people may even imagine that they have an encounter with Jesus. Feelings of paranoia and panic also may occur.⁶

Such experiences are not limited to involvement with psychedelic substances.

NEAR-DEATH EXPERIENCES

By near-death experiences (NDE), we refer to episodes associated with resuscitation from heart failure, acute illness, coma, drowning, and other dramatic physical events.⁷ Experiences similar in content and intensity may be reported in non-life threatening experiences—during sleep, fainting, meditation, and drug or alcohol use.⁸ The experiences of individuals who come close to death appear real to them and display similarities to those observed during hypnosis, sensory deprivation/overstimulation, epilepsy, flickering lights, and chanting or rhythmic drumming. The geometric patterns observed are basically similar.⁹ NDEs usually are marked by a feeling of peacefulness and may involve having a sense of being detached from one’s body, traveling through a dark tunnel, seeing a brilliant light associated with ideas of love and union, or seeing a beautiful (heavenly) landscape. Known individuals, now deceased, may be seen and communicated with; there may be pleasant music, a life review, and other phenomena.¹⁰

Accounting for such altered states of consciousness has intrigued scientists and has led to a conversation about the distinction between brain and mind.

MIND AND CONSCIOUSNESS

The relationship among the brain, mind, soul, and consciousness is at the center of some understandings of NDEs. The brain can be seen and handled, the mind cannot. From ancient times, this thought has led to the concept that the mind/consciousness, and perhaps also the soul, have an independent existence¹¹ (cf. 1 Samuel 28:9–14) and are immortal (cf. Genesis 3:4).

The mind can be viewed as a rapidly changing, virtual construct. It is dependent on the brain and reflects the operation of the neural networks associated with the chemical and hormonal stimuli being experienced. The mind has no particular location. During thinking and interactions, there are a multitude of signals involving many areas of the brain. Our perception of reality and responses are governed by the acuity and completeness of our senses and the mental structures we have built as a result of societal, moral, and environmental experiences. They also are governed by the complexity of the signal connections in the brain and their coordination. For example,

if the corpus callosum is split surgically, then essentially the left and right hemispheres of the brain display different perceptions, thoughts, feelings, memories, and sensations. Two minds coexist in the same individual.¹²

Consciousness represents the world as perceived by the individual, which involves using the mind in interpretation. There is no undisputed theory to explain consciousness, although it is known that stimulation of the claustrum region of the brain disrupts consciousness.¹³

The idea that some aspect of human existence survives clinical death continues to be pursued by philosophers, adherents of various religions, and others. Individuals who have recovered from cardiac arrest may sense events that happened subsequent to their reported clinical death. Some even claim clearer, faster, and more coherent thinking. This is slated as evidence of something surviving death,¹⁴ but from a strictly scientific point of view, the existence of an immortal soul has not been proved.¹⁵ Rather, the episodes described relate to changes in brain function.

NEAR-DEATH EPISODES REFLECT CHANGES IN BRAIN FUNCTION.

A common belief across cultures is that near-death experiences (NDEs) represent the spirit or soul leaving the body. However, this and other explanations are equally inconclusive.¹⁶ During clinical death, the brain is not dead but dysfunctional. It is not known when the NDE was generated. Memories are changeable and are influenced by unconscious thoughts, wishes, and worldview.¹⁷ NDEs, by their very nature, are reported retrospectively, which introduces a subjective element.

The explanation for the altered state of consciousness experienced is that the normal control processes in the brain have been disrupted, inputs from the environment are not occurring, and normal thought patterns have been disrupted. Such outcomes can be achieved through psychological, physical, and physiological stimulation. Achieving an altered state of consciousness is frequently associated with a reduction in sensory inputs.¹⁸

There is a range of common features of near-death that deserve comment. A few of them are as follows:

- **Out-of-body experiences.** Near-death experiences share some similarities with what occurs during the transition from wakefulness to sleep and as the result of drug reactions. The individual experiences the sensation of floating above his or her own body.¹⁹ Such sensations can also be induced by stimulating a designated area of the brain (part of the right angular gyrus). Out-of-body experiences represent complex somatosensory illusions.²⁰ Hence, such experiences essentially can be accounted for without recourse to the concept of the soul.

Consciousness represents the world as perceived by the individual, which involves using the mind in interpretation.

- **Meeting the deceased.** The idea of meeting the dead in an anticipated afterlife is a widespread notion. Individuals suffering from various pathologies (Alzheimer's and Parkinson's diseases, Charles Bonnet syndrome) have reported meeting ghosts, monsters, corpses, dead relatives, fairy-tale figures, and even seeing film-clip sequences. The sensation of someone standing behind an individual can be induced through electrical stimulation.²¹

- **After-death communication** with the deceased is a feature experienced by about a third of grieving individuals conducted in 24 countries and sometimes by those with NDEs. Such experiences are not related to ethnicity or religious views.²² Imagined communications can be induced through psychophysiological techniques involving giving sensory stimuli that produces an altered emotional state and receptiveness—two sessions can result in 75 percent likelihood of an altered state. After-death communication commonly is associated with going through a tunnel or similar structure toward a light source. The two types of experiences appear to represent the same phenomenon.²³

It seems that during these altered states of consciousness, the normal functional integration of brain networks is disrupted, and novel connections may be facilitated. It is this impairment of brain function that is considered responsible for hallucinations as well as transcendent and mystical experiences. Individuals also tend to conceive of various agents associated with the phenomena observed, which often are thought of as being supernatural.²⁴

However, the lack of NDEs in a majority of those surviving clinical death is a powerful argument against a supernatural experience and the existence of an immortal soul.²⁵

CHRISTIANS AND MYSTICAL EXPERIENCES

Being able to induce a mystical consciousness through taking psychedelic drugs has brought consternation into some Christian circles and anticipation by others who think they can now have a beatific vision whenever desired. From ancient times to the present, such mystical states have been achieved by monks and hermits through sensory deprivations or by yogis through autohypnosis and breath control in the pursuit of spiritual transcen-

dence or world peace. How can that be bad? And as a Christian, what harm could there be in bringing on a spiritual experience when one desires by means of drugs?

To answer that, there are some disturbing features associated with mystical episodes that should be noted:

- **Loss of conscious decision making and objectivity.**

The goal of Christian life is to understand, appreciate, and follow the example given by Jesus' life and ministry (1 Peter 2:21). Character development is the goal of life²⁶; objectivity has a cardinal claim. In contrast "there is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death" (Proverbs 14:12, NKJV).²⁷ There are biblical examples of those who moved down this pathway (Exodus 32:5–8; 1 Kings 18:26–29). Their attempts to induce mystical states were answered by swift judgment (Exodus 32:26–29; 1 Kings 18:40).

Conscious decision making is essential for a successful Christian experience. Eve succumbed to the hypnotic influence of Satan speaking through the serpent in Eden.²⁸ This is a warning to all not to seek an altered state of consciousness or mystical state of enlightenment to be "like God" (Genesis 3:5). Christians are advised to think, to reason, to be sober, and to be objective (e.g., Deuteronomy 32:7; Psalm 8:3, 4; Proverbs 14:15; Luke 12:27; Hebrews 3:1; Revelation 13:18). Scripture cautions even against the mind-fogging use of alcohol, enjoining being filled with the Holy Spirit instead (Ephesians 5:18).

- **A sense that life continues after death.** Mystical experiences have been used to bolster the idea that life continues after death, which subtly reinforces Satan's lie: "You will not surely die" (Genesis 3:4). The Scriptures are exceedingly clear that death involves a loss of consciousness: "For the living know that they will die; but the dead know nothing, And they have no more reward, For the memory of them is forgotten. Also their love, their hatred, and their envy have now perished; nevermore will they have a share in anything done under the sun" (Ecclesiastes 9:5, 6).

- **A sense of imminence.** The desire to have a personal encounter with God is very strong in some religious circles. This is one of the attractions of the Mass; it plays a key role in Eastern Orthodoxy in achieving theosis (divinization or uniting with God's essence).²⁹ The mystical experiences of the Desert Fathers, which included contemplation after the Eastern style and other ancient, unbiblical practices, is seen by the Catholic Church as the key to successful evangelism in today's world.³⁰

Some Christians have sought to encounter the Infinite through participating in autohypnosis or related strategies (centering prayer and the monastic traditions of the Desert Fathers). The fact that psychedelics can achieve the same end should make us cautious. God in times of

His own choice appeared to individuals such as Daniel, Paul, and John (Daniel 7:2–14; Acts 9:3–5; Revelation 1:9–11), but nowhere in Scripture is there support for artificially arranging genuine encounters with God.

- **Changes in feelings and behavior.** Feelings are not a reliable guide in the area of judgment or a substitute for faith. While the feelings of joy, blessedness, peace, and improvement in behavior are laudable, these, if not based on a relationship with the Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:6), have no firm and sustainable basis (John 3:3).

- **Visions.** The aesthetic experiences involving visions during near-death are accorded special relevance by those involved. By contrast, the visions recorded in the Bible were given on rare occasions to individuals specially chosen by God to be His messengers. Their meaning was explained either subsequently by the visionary or by others enabling the core points of emphasis to be grasped. They related to historical events, the emergence of philosophical ideas, or contained a revelation of God's plans. And given to all who accept Christ is the gift of the Holy Spirit to teach and enlighten in spiritual wisdom and truth (see 1 Corinthians 2:10 to 14), not only in understanding the mysteries of God but also how to live with equanimity and joy, even in the face of death.

CONCLUSION

From a biblical perspective, death represents the decay of the body and the cessation of activity by the mind and all consciousness. Achieving an altered state of consciousness frequently is associated with a reduction in sensory inputs or their alteration. Normal control processes in the brain have been disrupted. Experiences like those experienced during near-death can be achieved through psychological, physical, and physiological stimulation. In addition, they can be induced through drug use, when they are described as experiences of transcendence and out-of-body feelings, religious encounters, and visions of beings, and color and light disturbances. From the evidence presented, we can conclude that mind, consciousness, and body are interwoven and inseparable. Conscious decision making and objectivity are vital to the Christian experience, meaning the avenues to the mind must be closely guarded. ☸

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