



The Skeptics SA guide to Near death experiences

A critically injured accident victim lies on a hospital theatre operating table, he hears a distant voice say there is little hope of saving him. There is a loud ringing or buzzing sound in his ears as he starts moving through a long dark tunnel with a bright light at the end of it; suddenly he finds himself outside his physical body, looking down, and recognising his own inert shape swathed in white and those gathered around; he watches as the doctor and attendants feverishly go about their business; he sees the spirits of former friends and relatives who greet him lovingly; a being of light asks him to evaluate his life and helps him remember with a playback of some of the major events in his life; he fights to return to his body, and wakes to find himself in a hospital ward with an anxious wife by his side. He recovers, and later gropes for words adequate enough as he tries to relate his experience to others.

The foregoing is a typical description of what is termed a Near Death Experience, and which correlates generally with accounts given by accident and cardiac arrest victims after a life saving operation or resuscitation.

The possibility that we survive after death in spirit form has long intrigued man, and evidence for survival and matters relating

to it has long been sought by both psychological and scientific researchers. Many people believe that during a near death crisis they were transported to another level of existence. Believers in survival after death argue that as people from widely divergent backgrounds and beliefs experience remarkably similar events, this points to the reality of the experience and provides compelling evidence for the continued existence in some form or other of a metaphysical body.

One speculation suggests that a mechanism exists which releases the soul at death, and that in the case of a near death experience, the mechanism may be prematurely triggered.

In their book, *At the Hour of Death*, two parapsychologists, Karlis Osis and Erlandur Haraldsson, tend to support the idea of survival in their description of a typical near death experience: 'a vision, usually while the patient is fully conscious and not sedated. The vision is generally that of a dead friend or relative, who is typically described by the patient as being there to take him into death.' Their conclusions were based on large numbers of questionnaires sent to physicians and nurses who, as trained observers, would be more likely to be accurate in their accounts than the patients

themselves. If the reports are true, they would be comforting for those who believe in survival after death.

Generally the findings of most studies into NDEs indicate that there are common and distinct sequential stages through which the subjects pass. Firstly, a loud ringing or buzzing sound in the ears, followed by a feeling of tranquillity. Occasionally leaving the body and observing the surroundings from above is reported, and/or a review of events in their life, and/or being welcomed by deceased friends and relatives. Entering a dark tunnel, perceiving a bright light, and entering the light is a rather common experience. Occasionally subjects will give vivid descriptions of 'heaven' or, much more rarely, 'hell'. Quite often psychological changes are produced in many who have had the experience, not the least of which is a decreased fear of death.

While the idea of friends to welcome one into a life hereafter is comforting, does the evidence support the concept? Scientists are suspicious of claims that consciousness exists beyond death, and sceptics point out that many of the sensations referred to also occur during psychedelic drug trips. It seems likely that NDEs are closely related to these sorts of hallucina-

tions, but instead caused by the lack of oxygen and stress of nearly dying . A professor of earth sciences, Western Australian John Happs, gives what would appear to be the simplest and most plausible explanation for NDEs:

“The brain is an incredible machine, and when you deplete its oxygen supply you can get it to create all sorts of hallucinations... an altered state of consciousness can occur. There has been plenty of research done on altered states of consciousness, where the person is still conscious but the brain is creating scenes based on imagination.”

This is definitely a view supported by people who have experimented with drugs. Dr Susan Blackmore, Senior Lecturer in Psychology at the University of the West of England, has probably done as much research into NDEs and out of body experiences (OBEs) as anyone, and has written definitively on the subjects. Her theory parallels that of Happs and is based upon brain physiology, cognitive psychology and her own work on OBEs. She explains what is understood of how a healthy brain works, and what happens as, suffocating and cut off from normal sensory input, the brain struggles to survive and maintain a coherent model of the world. This death struggle, she argues, produces the abnormal experiences of an NDE.

Human vision system under conditions of oxygen starvation show that the periphery of vision will black out before the centre. This explains the commonly reported experience of seeming to be travelling down a tunnel. It ap-

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pears that similar crosscultural NDEs such as this, and others, can be adequately explained by the physiological similarity of the people experiencing them, rather than the reality of the experience.

While there are numerous apocryphal tales of near death visions being confirmed when the subject regains consciousness, Dr Blackmore's exhaustive investigations have shown that none of these have been adequately substantiated. And in fact, the more startling reports of NDEs seem to be complete fabrications.

Furthermore, a fundamental objection to the hypothesis that some have witnessed life after death in an NDE, is that the experience was still that of a living person. For additional information regarding NDEs, we strongly recommend Susan Blackmore's *Dying to Live* (Grafton, 1993).

Harry Edwards

Skeptics SA

The South Australian branch of the Australian Skeptics

For further information on the Australian Skeptics and the journal, *the Skeptic*, contact:

Email: <info@skepticssa.org.au>

Web site: <www.skepticssa.org.au>