

Thanatoperience

Stephen Slade Tien, Ph.D.

New York City Department of Mental Health

ABSTRACT: Near-death experiences (NDEs) can be seen as special cases of psychological transition. They often involve a deep transformation in the sense of self. I examine the NDE as such, according to my phase theory of transition, and I analyze an NDE with the help of that theory. I conclude that the study of NDEs may provide insight into the general psychology of transition.

Near-death experiences (NDEs) are generally accompanied by a “forced” breakdown in the normal sense of self (Grof & Halifax, 1977; Noyes & Kletti, 1976). This dissolution of ego parallels the “dying to self” that is a central theme in mystery rites, mysticism and Eastern philosophies and religions (Campbell, 1951; Eliade, 1958). Somewhat analogously, the point has been made that the process of psychotherapy necessitates a death of the self in order for growth and health to take place (Fingarette, 1965; Hillman, 1979). Similarly, psychedelics, major illnesses, accidents, crises of life or other powerful experiences may generate a sense that the old self has passed away and that a new one has been born (Henderson & Oakes, 1963; Jung, 1956; Siegel, 1980). It is in this vein that NDEs offer a unique opportunity to study the processes involved in major psychological change. Specifically, they reveal the phases of self-renewal—the “rebirth” of the self within the lifetime of the individual.

Dr. Tien is a clinical psychologist with the New York City Department of Mental Health. Requests for reprints should be addressed to Dr. Tien at 131 West 88th Street, New York, NY 10024.

Phase Theory

In this article it is my intention to examine NDEs using a phase theory I have recently developed. What the theory offers is a psychological analysis of the problem of transition or transformation in the sense of self. The phases of renewal, derived from the Latin, are *immanence, obstruence, descendance, experience, ascendance, emergence and transcendence*. Each phase describes an ontological condition of the self or, in other words, a psychological state that colors the person's sense of being. These states of being of the self are related to a particular phase of transformation as follows:

- Immanence = Being in.
- Obstruence = Being stuck.
- Descendance = Being down.
- Experience = Being through.
- Ascendance = Being up.
- Emergence = Being out.
- Transcendence = Being beyond.

Although I have listed each phase as a discrete condition or situation of the self, it is important to note that they actually refer to an ongoing, dynamic psychological process. An NDE, as with other types of major transformation experiences, is not a static series of encounters but a moving, living and constantly changing experience. It is the process of such an experience that the phases finally seek to address rather than the parts. Therefore, the phases "reduce" the experience with the purpose of understanding the whole of it more fully thereafter. The following NDE in a college student will provide the point of entry into this form of analysis.

A Thanatoperience

I was 18 years old when I died without dying. I had a *thanatoperience*, my word for a death venture or dying experience. It happened on a freezing winter night when I was under the influence of a well known psychedelic drug. At first, everything was fine that evening. The only thing remarkable was a funny feeling I had that something incredible was about to happen. I felt destined for some long overdue rendezvous. Wild with anticipation I began running as fast as I could down an icy road. Suddenly, thinking that I saw some friends of mine riding in a car, I darted into the road and was struck down. What happened after

that was almost otherworldly. I saw all the impressive events of my life flash before me in a kind of time-lapse photography. Many things I had completely repressed. Other things I just barely remembered. I saw the beautiful as well as the traumatic moments. Most amazing of all, perhaps, I seemed to see my future life as well. Always, the replayed scenes were full of the pure emotion I felt when they had first happened. Then I realized that my consciousness was free of my physical being. My mind seemed to move with quickness and purpose. Soon I began merging with an intense, radiant light that filled my entire vision. The light was paradoxical in quality. It was hot but not burning, blinding yet allowed me to see. I could still look right at it. In fact, I could see nothing else. A feeling of almost unbearable ecstasy came over me. I was one with all things. The road, meanwhile, felt like my warm mother—even Mother Earth. It was all like a return to some long forgotten yet ultimately important place. Then I felt as though I were inside some “cosmic” place back at the origin of things. At first the space was empty yet seemed full of meaning. Soon, however, I felt my body forming and moving down an ever-narrowing tunnel. As I approached its end I felt that I was in my mother’s birth canal. The passageway had become a fleshy, blood-filled entrance back into the world. I felt both pain and pleasure in this labor. Birth would necessitate desire and struggle—an incredible effort. Somehow, in spite of my condition, the life urge had overwhelmed my “dying.” I felt that I had to be born. Finally, after a great effort, I sensed that I was almost back, that is, back to the world I thought I had left behind. When I had “emerged” I was amazed at how clear and beautiful the world appeared. It seemed utterly benevolent and free of bad feeling. I, in turn, felt like the first man on Earth—the dawn of awareness itself—simple and innocent. A love towards all things suffused my being. Soon, I found myself standing at the side of a road. I looked at the scene unfolding before me. I had no idea how much time had passed. It could have been a moment or an eternity. An ambulance was at the scene, its lights rotating and flashing red in the darkness of the night. Curious, I watched as the medics bent over the figure lying in the road. I noticed that they were wildly gesticulating and frantically scurrying about attending to the body that lay there. Suddenly, I felt a stab of recognition. It was my body that lay there in the middle of the road—apparently dead—even as “I” stood at the side of the road watching! Then, as soon as the medics picked up the stretcher, my consciousness seemed to fly through the air and land in this—my body. Back inside, my consciousness again seemed to come from somewhere between my eyes. Yet, I knew beyond a doubt that it was the same one that only moments before had been a distant observer. Later, I remember waking up briefly in the ambulance and then again much later on when I was in the emergency room at the hospital. Today, I feel that the experience has provided me with a heightened sense of intuition and calmness about life. Often I have had a sense of *deja vu* about the world. Like the experience, which seems in retrospect to have had an ageless, awe-ful quality about it, I feel that a part of me—my soul, perhaps—has been “here” a countless

number of times before and that in some way it will be here again and again until I reach a state of pure consciousness; until then forever dying and being reborn.

Analysis

The NDE includes many of the classic features noted by Raymond Moody (1975), Karlis Osis and Erlendur Haraldsson (1977), Kenneth Ring (1980), Michael Sabom (1982), and others. Encounters with light, the tunnel, the life review, feelings of peace and calm, out-of-body experiences, and so forth, have been noted by many researchers. In addition, this particular NDE may be amplified due to the additive influence of the psychedelic (Pahnke, 1969). For the purposes of my theory, moreover, this NDE presents the clear phenomenology of a self undergoing deep change within a relatively short period of time.

In the beginning of his experience (I will refer to him as T.) everything is rather ordinary. Even though he is high and excited his experience is still quite normal. He is involved with the world around him more or less on his own terms. This is immanence, a being-into or being-with. This phase and condition of the self is precursory to periods of transition. It describes a sort of mental status quo, a psychological state of the self engaged with the ongoing, everyday flow of life.

An NDE, of course, quickly becomes something quite other than ordinary. To the self, it is an immediate crisis. T. is hit by a car and nearly killed. From out of nowhere to be suddenly face to face with death is to experience a feeling of extreme danger for one's sense of being. This sets up a psychological condition of obstruction, or being-stuck. The self has reached the limits of ordinary psychological being. T.'s consciousness simply cannot remain static. The self is trapped yet must escape its awful predicament.

The phase of descendance follows quickly. It is the beginning of transition proper. In descendance, which is being-down, the self falls apart or breaks away. T.'s consciousness surrenders to the chaos or cosmos (order) surrounding him—even if only for a matter of moments. It “takes over” his sense of being (Noyes & Kletti, 1976). There are two related phenomena here. One, he sees his life pass before him, and two, he seems to leave his painful body behind. Thus, the phase of descendance is a kind of psychological falling out. A deadly and impossible situation “in person” is given up and the self flees into the freedom of a consciousness detached from its physique. And, in a way, it leaves

nothing behind. It takes all its memories with it. The consciousness of the near-dead person gathers itself together and exits. What is interesting is where it goes. It is not that the consciousness goes to some unknown geographical point but that it enters a different state or condition of being. First, it seems to burst its boundaries completely, allowing itself to exist as energy without form (Ring, 1980). Then, from its condition of brilliance, the consciousness begins to contract simultaneously and return to a new beginning or point of formation.

This leads to the phase of experience. At this point the broken or fallen self gradually comes together again through inner work. The self passes out, passes through, and gives form to itself. It really involves a kind of death-rebirth (Grosso, 1983). That is, the passage of T. through "the tunnel" is a condition of focusing and centering of the self in response to its breaking out from its normal location in the body. This reformation of the self is possible, however, only because it has left its deadening boundaries, gathered itself, become freshly energized and then newly shaped again. The tunnel as birth canal is the passageway out from and back to the world—as well as a place of heroic labor (a *laborintus*, hence labyrinth) that is in the service of finding, saving and transforming the self (Arnold, 1979).

All this reintegration of the self is a building up, a process of ascendance in contrast to the breakdown of the self that occurred earlier. In the latter phases of transformation the self is restructured. As such, T. begins to seek the world and his body again. The self desires forms and boundaries to construct itself anew (Evans-Wentz, 1957).

Eventually, the self is psychologically ready to come out. This being-out is the period of emergence. For T., emergence was like seeing the world for the first time. It seemed transformed, rather like him. His consciousness encountered things both simply and directly. In a psychological sense he really was somewhat like a newborn child—only he had delivered himself—with the help of that whole world around him, which acted like a womb. Ironically, however, his emergence did not end with an escape out-from, but with a return to the confines of his body. But although his body was more or less the same, his consciousness and sense of self were changed as a result of his experience.

The final phase is transcendence. In his NDE T. went beyond death to return to life. His ecstasy (ex-stasis) was in his renewed mental state, not in his leaving behind the boundaries of life. Thus, in NDEs the self goes out from the fear of death towards a psychological state that energizes and gives it form in order that it may transcend death. This process, in turn, affords the self a new immanence or being-into everyday life and reality.

Conclusion

As Flynn (1982), Grof & Halifax (1977), Ring (1980) and others have noted, the NDE is a transforming experience. The self that emerges from the other side of a death encounter is one changed. The person's values, attitudes, beliefs and purposes can be quite radically altered. Simply stated, the normal human consciousness cannot help being powerfully affected by NDE phenomena. In this paper I have tried to demonstrate the phases that the NDE self goes through in its confrontation with its mortality and immortality. My conclusion is that the NDE is a powerful phenomenological laboratory. Within a relatively brief period of time the self that undergoes it demonstrates the basic psychology of transformation and renewal.

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