

# Recreating Near-Death Experiences: A Cognitive Approach

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**ABSTRACT:** I describe a guided meditation that, when used by near-death experiencers (NDErs), recreates fragments of their NDEs. The meditation is based on Michael Persinger's neurological theory regarding the "God Experience," and its success supports that theory. The present study included too few subjects to support quantitative analysis, and must be regarded as a pilot study.

It seems reasonable to assume that any procedure that will recreate fragments of near-death experiences (NDEs) in those who have had been through them may also shed light on how they occur. There are already reports of elements of NDEs having been elicited through hypnosis (Babb, 1989), and lucid dreaming (Rogo, 1990), and procedures for inducing out-of-body experiences (Brent, 1979). In this article, I describe a nonvisual guided meditation that has succeeded in recreating some elements of NDEs in a small sample of self-reported NDErs, who volunteered at the 1996 conference of the International Association for Near-Death Studies (IANDS) in Oakland, CA.

The Sensed Presence Guided Meditation procedure consists of imagining a "presence" behind oneself, and to the left. At the same time, one must be aware of the breath, perhaps putting a very slight emphasis on exhalation. Unlike previously published techniques, each feature in the Sensed Presence Guided Meditation has a specific neurological rationale, and is the only guided meditation I am aware of that was designed using neurological theories.

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### Rationale

The sensed presence is the feeling that one is “not alone” or that someone is standing behind the experiencer. It has also been described as feeling a “force” or “energy” in the room. So far, all the NDErs I have questioned have reported that they experience a sensed presence often. A sensed presence is one example of a temporal lobe sign. Other temporal lobe signs include *déjà vu*, the fleeting visions that can occur as a person is falling asleep, the feeling that one is moving when one is not, inner voices, paresthesias such as “pins and needles,” or electric-like buzzes in the body. Temporal lobe signs, especially when they occur in the pathology of epilepsy, are often referred to as subclinical hallucinations. It is possible that the neurobiological bases of temporal lobe signs and hallucinations are the same.

According to Persinger’s theory (1994a), the phenomenon of the sensed presence relies on the fact that we have two senses of self, rooted in the brain’s two temporal lobes, and occurs when the left and right hemispheric senses of self fall out of phase, or are mismatched with one other. When this happens, the subordinate right hemisphere’s sense of self intrudes into the left side’s awareness, and is experienced as an external presence. Persinger’s model of the sensed presence can explain hallucinatory “entities” such as Muses (Persinger and Makarec, 1992b), and ego-alien “voices in the head” (Persinger, 1994b). Findings associating temporal lobe signs with imagination (Persinger and Makarec, 1991–92), suggested that the sensed presence may be facilitated in those who experience it simply by imagining it.

The Sensed Presence Guided Meditation involves imagining that the sensed presence is located behind the subject on the left side. I suggest that it be located behind the subject because the sensed presence is not usually a visual hallucination, and attempting to imagine something in front may tend to recruit the visual cortex; I assumed that the more complex a given act of imagination is, the lower will be its chances for success without practice. I also instructed the subjects to imagine the presence on the left because imaginary phenomena on the left side of the body recruit the right temporal cortex (all subjects were right-handed), which is specialized for positive affect (Mandell, 1980).

Positive affect (including “peak experiences”) is a common experience among those who practice meditations that rely on paying attention to the breath. This observation, commonplace in those religious traditions, suggested that these meditations may have kindled positive affective right temporal lobe pathways or microstructures. Further, there is a

higher incidence of the sensed presence among meditators (Persinger, 1992a) than control groups. Because of these observations, the attended breath seemed a good candidate for a means of inducing the positive affective altered state of consciousness upon which the experience of the NDE sensed presence, like any other hallucination, depends (Horowitz, 1970).

The combination of a sensed presence and right temporal lobe positive affect could possibly induce an experience that might be described as God (Persinger, 1987). Because the experience of God appears in so many NDEs, NDErs seemed like an appropriate population in which to test both the Sensed Presence Guided Meditation's ability to induce positive affect and Persinger's model of the "God Experience," and the theory of vectorial hemisphericity.

### **Method**

I questioned 7 self-reported NDErs about whether or not they often "had the feeling that someone was in the room with them, but on looking, found that there was no one there," or often had the feeling that "they were not alone" when they actually were. All answered in the affirmative. They were instructed to imagine that the same "presence" was behind them, and to their left. At the same time they were asked to pay attention to their breath. All subjects were encouraged to report only their first or second application of the technique, and none of them were encouraged to maintain the experience they reported more than 1 minute.

Because the present study was limited to just a few subjects, I performed no quantitative analysis.

### **Results**

Subject 1 (Ron) re-experienced the same "velvety, infinite space" together with the feeling of "all-encompassing peace and contentment" he had experienced during his NDE. Subject 2 (Mellon-Thomas) reported: "I had a brief vision of a pyramid that conveyed the feeling of mysteries revealed." This subject's NDE included a transcendent experience in which "mysteries were revealed" to him. On being questioned, he reported that the feeling of "mysteries revealed" was the same one that accompanied the transcendent portion of his NDE.

Subject 3 (Scott) said he felt a "very comfortable" feeling, and felt that the presence he experienced during the meditation was an "old friend" from his NDE. Subject 4 (Julie) said she felt herself being lifted up, and saw an angel. On being questioned, she said that the same angel had appeared during her NDE. Subject 5 (D. W.) Said he experienced the same darkness he had experienced during the first phase of his NDE. "I just exist," he said. There's "just nothing." He added that he felt that "If I don't hold on, I'll just go in."

Subject 6 (T. B.) Said he felt that the technique "cleared Mysteries." On being questioned, he confirmed that the same feeling occurred during his NDE during a transcendent experience. Subject 7 (Kim) said that she first felt and then saw Jesus. On being questioned, she said that Jesus had appeared in her NDE.

### **Addendum**

Since this paper was accepted for publication, an additional ten self-reported NDEers were administered the Sensed Presence Guided Meditation as part of interviews conducted for another project at the School of Shiatsu and Massage at Harbin Hot Springs. All ten reported phenomena during the guided meditation which had also occurred during their NDEs. None of these latter group reported experiencing the presence of God, although a wide range of other NDE phenomena were reported.

### **Discussion**

Although God appeared to only one of the subjects in this informal study, the affects induced included many of those that are a part of the "God-experience" (Persinger, 1987). The neurological model of this meditation, inducing an altered state of consciousness, together with right temporal lobe affect, and imagining a subtle hallucination into an actual manifestation, implies that the experience of God is a special, intense example of the sensed presence, occurring in conjunction with highly amplified positive affect. Possibly, if this technique were to be practiced regularly, it might eventually culminate in the visions of God so sought after in theistic mystic traditions.

The experiences the Sensed Presence Guided Meditation induced were all characteristic of different phases of NDEs. An exploratory

hypothesis to explain this is that NDEs are the phenomena experienced by NDErs as they progress through various states of consciousness, one of whose phenomenological concomitants is the amplified experience of the sensed presence as a Being of Light and/or God. This hypothesis, combined with the supposition that NDEs are hallucinatory, allows the possibility that the varying phenomenology produced by this technique reflect the pathways and/or microstructures most deeply kindled in the course of an individual NDE. The fact that only one subject experienced God may be explained by supposing that only one subject had sufficiently kindled these pathways. Further studies of this technique among those who have seen a Being of Light as described by Raymond Moody (1975) would help clarify this point.

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