

DEATH AND NEAR-DEATH: A COMPARISON OF TIBETAN AND EURO-AMERICAN EXPERIENCES

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This article explores two intertwined subjects related to death. First is the variation in near-death experiences (NDEs) of contemporary Americans of European descent within the United States. Second is the similarities and differences between Euro-American near-death experiences and death experiences (DEs) as understood by Tibetan Buddhist lamas and yogis of the eighth to eleventh centuries A.D., and described in the Tibetan books of the dead. By taking a broad view that examines both intracultural and crosscultural variations in death-related experiences, the nature and several causes of these experiences are more readily inferred. This approach especially helps to clarify the effect of learned culture on the content and structure of death-related experiences.

The comparative analyses and data patterns presented here further our understanding of near-death and death in four ways. *First, they suggest that NDEs and DEs vary systematically in their core content and structure among cultures with diverse world views.* This finding accords with other crosscultural studies of NDEs (Counts, 1983; Pasricha & Stevenson, 1986; Schorer, 1985). It contrasts with some early research that suggested the core elements of NDEs are invariant (Ring, 1985, p. 48) or very similar (Moody, 1975, pp. 111-28) crossculturally.

*furthering
understanding
of
near-death
and
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ways*

Second, these comparisons, and published literature, suggest that multiple factors cause or affect the content and structure of a NDE. These factors pertain to multiple phenomenological levels: per-

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sonal circumstance of death and life history, age-gender class, subculture, culture, and pan-human psychology and neurophysiology. It appears that known variability in NDEs cannot be explained by and reduced to any single causal mechanism. This view contrasts with some previous attempts to interpret NDEs in primarily biological (e.g., Rodin, 1980), cultural (e.g., Zaleski, 1987), psychological (e.g., Noyes & Kletti, 1976), archetypal psychological (e.g. Grosso, 1983), or parapsychological (e.g., Ring, 1980) terms.

Third, the comparisons suggest that only some of the systematic differences in NDEs and DEs among cultures are learned. This contrasts with the view that NDEs are “culturally-constructed narrative wholes” or “dramas,” inseparably enmeshed within and shaped by culturally learned linguistic categories, beliefs, world views, and “social religious imagination” (Zaleski, 1987, pp. 195-99). It also contrasts with the ideas that NDEs are the product of wishful thinking or expectations about death based on learned cultural beliefs (Matlock, 1989, p. 169; Moody, 1975; DeSpelder & Strickland, 1983, p. 403). To explain apparently “unlearned” systematic crosscultural variation in NDEs and DEs, two “alternative” models are offered—one depth-psychological and one positing the experience of nonordinary realities.

*insight
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Finally, the comparisons give insight into the possible nature of death, including the general content and spatial structure of “nonordinary realities” perceived in the death space, the dynamics of the boundaries between these perceived realities, the general sequence of the death process, and some of its apparent, most general purposes and meanings. The comparison also suggests some fundamental, apparent properties of time, space, and the human “body” and consciousness in the death space. Most basically, the comparison suggests that, at least for Euro-Americans and Tibetans, the death space is much like life in its essential functioning and meaning: it is a set of realities or states of consciousness for learning, growing, and healing through choice and integration.

Similarities between Euro-American NDEs and the death process described in Tibetan books of the dead have been pointed out previously (Becker, 1985; Moody, 1975; Sogyal, 1992). However, comparisons have usually been informal, in contrast to the formal analysis of content and structure presented here. An exception is Epstein’s (1989) related analysis of the similarities between Tibetan *’das-log* experiences (NDEs) and Euro-American NDEs.

This article begins with a dissection of Euro-American NDEs into several dimensions of variability and discussion of their different causes. Next, the Tibetan DE described in Tibetan books of the

dead is characterized. As a context for comparing the Euro-American and Tibetan experiences, some basic world view assumptions in contemporary Euro-American Christianity and Mahayana Tibetan Buddhism are summarized. Finally, Euro-American NDEs and Tibetan descriptions of DEs are compared for similarities and differences in their content and structure, and several explanations of these are offered. The overall direction of the paper is from a discussion of variability to the elucidation of possible universals in the dying and death processes.

A basic assumption that underlies this comparison of near-death and death experiences is that the two phenomena are closely related in their function and dynamics, and that the NDE is the beginning of the death process. Similarities found in the content and sequence of NDEs and DEs, as well as similarities of NDEs to deathbed visions (Osis & Haraldsson, 1977), support this view.

NEAR-DEATH EXPERIENCES AMONG EURO-AMERICANS: MULTIPLE CAUSES AND PREVIOUS RESEARCH

Early studies of Euro-American NDEs (Moody, 1975; Ring, 1980; Sabom, 1982) differ in approach from this study in three ways. First, they aimed at constructing a general archetypal model of NDEs and defining their possibly universal, "core" features, rather than exploring their variation and sources of variation. Moody's (1975, pp. 21-23) and Ring's (1980, pp. 102-03) models of sequences of NDE events, and Ring's (1980, pp. 32-33) scaling of events to measure the relative depth of a NDE are each idealized composite summaries. This approach was reasonable at the time, since typological description almost always precedes the study of variance in developing sciences. Second, early studies focused more on the content (imagery, sensations), affective tone, and meaning of NDEs than the sequencing and spatial structuring of events. Finally, "places" in the "landscape" of the perceptions of the dying (e.g., in-the-body, out-of-the-body, tunnel, void, another world) were confounded with "events" at those places (e.g., feeling peaceful, seeing the Light, life review, greetings by messengers), rather than distinguished. Both were labelled "features" of NDEs. This equation inhibited the study of consistency and variation in the structure of NDEs, as separate from consistency and variation in their content.

early studies of NDEs differ from this study

The alternative approach that is used here to study NDEs conceptually, though not statistically, follows an analysis-of-variance design. In this strategy, variation rather than uniformity is the focus, multiple dimensions of variation are defined, and different combinations of sources of variation for different dimensions are sought.

Taking this approach, recent literature shows that contemporary Euro-American NDEs vary significantly along seven different dimensions. These are: which (1) *general classes* of places and (2) *general classes* of events are experienced, (3) the *specific form* of places and events, (4) the *sequence* with which events and (5) the *sequence* with which places are experienced, (6) the *affective tone* of experiences, and (7) their *cognitive-sensory* characteristics. For at least the dimension of sequence, it is essential to analyze separately events and places in order to reveal patterning. Also, the different dimensions appear to be attributable to different sets of causal factors. These factors include the personal circumstance of death, one's personal life-history and system of meaningful symbols, age and gender, varying responses of the "other world" to the person having the NDE, culture or subculture-specific learned beliefs and symbols, culture-specific perceptions or projections that are not learned, and pan-human biology (see Table 1).

TABLE 1
SOURCES OF VARIATION IN EURO-AMERICAN NEAR-DEATH EXPERIENCES

Cause of Variation	DIMENSION OF VARIATION						
	Which General Classes of Places are Experienced	Which General Classes of Events are Experienced	Specific Form of Places and Events	Sequence of Events	Sequence of Places	Affective Tone of the Experience	Cognitive-Sensory Characteristics
circumstances of death:							
depth of experience as a function of closeness or perceived closeness to death	+	+				+	+
intent (suicide/nonsuicide)	sometimes	sometimes				sometimes	
cause of trauma		?				?	?
personal life-history and personally meaningful symbols			+			?	?
age and gender		+					+
personally varying responses of the "other world" to the NDEr	?	?	?	?			
learned, subculture or culture-specific beliefs and symbols	+	+	+	?	?	+	+
culture-specific perceptions not learned	?	?	+	?	?	+	+
pan-human biology	+	+			?		

Three factors that constitute circumstances of death are known to cause systematic variation among Euro-American NDEs in the *general classes of events and places* that are experienced and in affective tone. These are (1) the depth to which the NDE proceeded, as a function of how close the person came to death or perceived they came to death, and perhaps the duration of the trauma, (2) whether the NDE arose from an attempt at suicide, and (3) whether the NDE occurred during childbirth under anesthesia.

Regarding the first factor, Moody (1975, pp. 17, 24) noted that persons who have been resuscitated after having been thought or pronounced clinically dead by their doctors tend to have more “dramatic” NDEs, i.e., NDEs with a fuller sequence of events, than persons who only came close to physical death. Stevenson et al. (1989, p. 52) and Noyes and Kletti (1976) qualified Moody’s finding, concluding from empirical data that a person’s perception of their closeness to death, rather than their actual closeness to death, may be more essential to precipitating NDE features (see also Gabbard et al., 1981; Greyson, 1983; Ring, 1980, pp. 87, 90). Moody (1975, p. 24) also noted that persons who were thought to be dead a longer time had more complete NDEs. Ring (1979) found in a sample of 102 cases that events and places that are later in Moody’s archetypal sequence were experienced by Euro-Americans in systematically decreasing frequency: feeling of peace (60%); out-of-body experience (37%); entering a dark tunnel or void (23%); seeing the Light (16%), and entering the Light (10%). In other words, the chance of occurrence of an event or place in an NDE and the range of events or places experienced appears to be closely related to the depth of progression in the process.

*relation
to
depth
of
progression*

Some NDEs arising from suicide attempts differ substantially in the general classes of places and events that are experienced, and their affective tone, compared to NDEs caused by all other modes of trauma. Nonsuicide Near Death Experiencers (NDErs) who experience a dark, vast void tend to find it “black” and “peaceful” and/or “pleasant,” e.g., “warm” or “velvety” (Ring, 1980, pp. 55-56). In contrast, some suicide attempters report entering a “gray,” “murky” haze that is “confusing” or an unpleasant or “awful” “limbo” state (Moody, 1975, p. 143; Ring, 1980, pp. 118, 122). Whereas the former may be a common experience and symbol of transition between altered states of consciousness or nonordinary realities (see below), the latter is reminiscent of the ambivalent mental state that precipitates some suicide attempts (see case in Ring, 1980, p. 122). A person who attempted suicide may also repeatedly re-experience the problematic issue that led to the attempt, causing them to feel “trapped” (Moody, 1977, p. 45). Occasionally, suicide attempters report “terrifying” figures (Giovetti,

1982, p. 12) or “unsettling hallucinatory images” (Ring, 1980, p. 124). Also, the Light may play a more stern, teaching, warning role with uncomfortable messages (e.g., “No one cares about you. . . . It is your job to care for yourself”) rather than being a source of overwhelming love (Morse, 1990, pp. 159, 161). However, it appears that most suicide attempters have NDEs similar to typical Euro-American NDEs in their core experiences, the frequency of occurrence of core experiences, their affective tone, and their proportional rate of occurrence (Ring & Franklin, 1981).

A small percentage of women who have NDEs during childbirth under anesthesia are reported to have disturbing NDEs, based on a small sample (Greyson & Bush, 1992, p. 104). The distressing experiences include eternal emptiness, being mocked, and a sense of all of life being an illusion.

Other circumstances of near-death have been reported to affect the content and cognitive-sensory qualities of Euro-American NDEs, but require verification. Noyes and Slymen (1979) found the NDEs of the seriously ill to have more mystical kinds of experiences, those of survivors of drowning to be visually enhanced, and those of survivors of falls and car accidents to be more depersonalized. Greyson (1991, pp. 52, 55) states that having a life review is far more common when near-death comes suddenly and unexpectedly, and that “hellish” experiences tend to be associated with greater physiological brain malfunction.

Personal Life-history

*variations
in
specific
forms*

Euro-American NDEs vary from person to person in the *specific forms* in which general classes of events and places are experienced. Table 2 shows some of the great range of variants reported for certain features in the NDEs of adults and children (including suicide attempters with positive experiences). One probable source of such variations is the life history of the person, the symbolic associations of forms with meanings and affects that accrue over their life, and the relative intensity of those affects. This hypothesis has not been tested.

To say that symbolic associations accrued over a lifetime determine a part of the content of a NDE, on first appearance, supports the broader interpretation that NDEs in part are the projection of personal expectations or wishful thinking. However, the alternative, nonordinary reality interpretation of the NDE—that it is an experience of other realities that varies from person to person and that it is in part orchestrated by other than the person—also is consistent with the data in Table 2. Supporting the nonordinary reality explanation is a study made by Lindstrom (n.d.) of deathbed

TABLE 2

VARIANTS IN THE FORM OF EVENTS AND PLACES IN EURO-AMERICAN NDES.

Noise Before or While Leaving the Body

buzzing inside head, ringing, click, roar, banging, whistling, wind, whooshing sound in ears, wind bells in the distance, majestic music

The Tunnel

tunnel, rectangular tunnel, round tunnel turning into square, tube, cylinder, well, sewer, tunnel with concentric circles, tunnel with colored ridges, enclosure, trough, narrow v-shaped trough, impenetrable dark valley, cone-shaped space, funnel

The Dark Void

void, vacuum, cave, swirling black clouds, black, gray water, whitish grayish sandish haze, velvety, safe, protected, warm, a lot of pinpricks of light, lights at a distance, shiny sparkles all over, down

The Non-Physical "Body"

Form: globular version of human body with appendages, without appendages, amorphous cloud, without eyes, no body—pure consciousness, point of consciousness, little ball of energy

Constitution: mist, wispy, cloud, smoke-like, vapor, transparent, transparent but not really, cloud of colors, orange-yellow-blue/indigo, no colors, white, glowing composed of light, energy pattern, charged, weightless, airy like a feather, piece of paper blown upward, words can't describe, density but as waves, no temperature, comfortable warmth

Senses: heightened vision, hearing, occasionally smell and taste, no touch, no pressure, zoom up and back with vision

Mobility: can move quickly from place to place, passes through solids, timeless, time speeded up

Consciousness: can read other's thoughts, no vocabulary to thoughts picked up, speak to greeters with the mind

Border or Transition To the Light

door, fog, waterline on a beach, loading dock, rainbow bridge across the sky, beautiful glowing arch, canopy of blue and silver rain

The Light's Form

Color: white, crystal clear, yellowish white, amber, very bright, very harsh, very bright but also very soft, does not hurt to stare at it, doesn't block out the background surrounding it, surrounded by blackness, its rays do not penetrate the tunnel, sparkles around it

Constitution: can't see through it

Form: totally encompassing, rectangular, huge beam, a glowing cloud

Quality: loving, warm, accepting, kind, safe, joy, comfort, pleasure, euphoric, calming, relief, beauty, irresistible magnetic attraction, perfect understanding, complete knowledge, perfect love, overwhelming compassion, fun, delicious

Communication: direct thought transfer, no language, a voice

The Border between This World and the Other World

lake, river, body of water, grey mist, door, door without a knob, fence across a field, field of flowers, a line, a line intuited but not perceived, a green plank, a cliff, a waterfall, edge of the tunnel with a sea of light beyond, a box with a green and red button for choosing to live or to die

Descriptions are from Moody (1975), Morse (1990), Ring (1980), Ring and Franklin (1981).

visions. She points out that those relatives who may greet the dying have two common characteristics: their appearance may be a surprise to the dying, yet they are those who are best suited for providing comfort for the dying in accordance with their history of family relations.

Age and Gender

These two factors appear to affect the *general classes* of events, but not places, that Euro-Americans experience. Children are less likely than adults to perceive deceased relatives (Bush, 1983; Greyson, 1991, p. 54). This is expectable, given the short length of life of a child and the small numbers of deaths of relatives that a child normally would experience compared to an adult. Children also report life reviews less frequently than adults (Bush, 1983; Greyson, 1991, p. 54; Morse, 1990, p. 140), which may again relate to their limited length of life. In these ways, age acts as an aspect of personal life-history and as a causal factor. The motifs reported by some children (Morse, 1990) also appear to be more "fairy-taleish" and colorful than those described by adults. Here, age acts as an aspect of subculturally learned beliefs and symbols as a causal factor. Finally, females have been found more often than males to experience meetings with other people (Sabom, 1982). This may in part reflect the fact that females, more so than men, tend to be taught to be relationship-oriented, versus individuated and achievement-oriented, in Euro-America society (Gilligan, 1982, pp. 8-17).

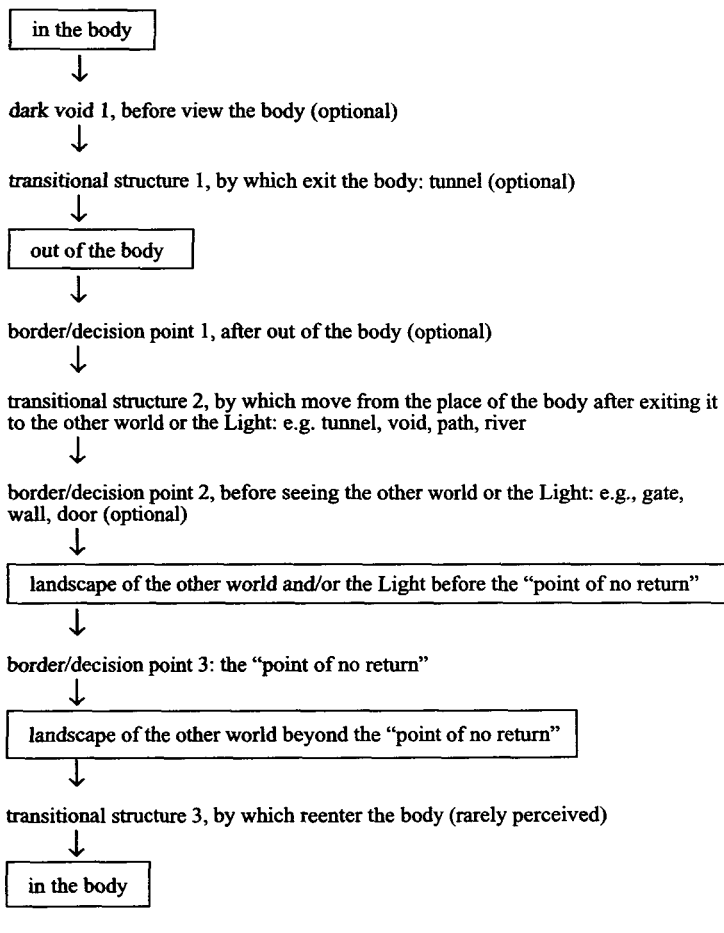
*differences
in
experiences
of
children
and
adults*

Personal Variations in the NDE Sequence

NDEs range widely among persons not only in the specific forms of places and events that are experienced, but also in the sequence with which these features occur. In describing sequence variations, it is essential that "places" be discriminated from "events" at places. This is necessary because, among Euro-Americans, it appears that the places that are experienced occur in a consistent sequence (Figure 1; Table 4 below), whereas events do not. Of the places experienced, only the tunnel and void may occur in several sequential positions and optionally. This variation is expectable in that the tunnel and void may be the mind's alternative representations of transitions between states or levels of consciousness or "nonordinary realities" (Ring, 1980, p. 238), of which a deep NDE can have several. The tunnel is a crossculturally universal symbol of transition (e.g., Blackmore & Troscianko, 1989) and is frequently experienced as such in shamanic journeys (Eliade, 1964; Harner, 1980), holotropic breathwork (Scherer, 1990), and spiritual healing (Brennan, 1988, p. 68).¹ The sequence of places shown in Figure 1 is found in all cases of NDEs reported by Moody (1975) and Morse (1990).

FIGURE 1
SEQUENCES OF PLACES EXPERIENCED IN NEAR DEATH EXPERIENCES

“Places” experienced as a consistent sequence in Euro-American NDEs. Generalized, without exceptions, from all cases described in Moody (1975) and Morse (1990). Any given NDE may include only some of the “places” in the sequence.



In contrast, many “events” can occur in any of several “places,” leading to greater variation among persons in the sequence of events than the sequence of places experienced. For example, deceased relatives may be seen before the NDEr leaves his or her body (e.g., Moody, 1975, p. 55), soon after leaving the body (e.g., Moody, 1975, p. 56), within the tunnel (Serdahely, 1989, p. 56), or in the other world (e.g., Moody, 1975, pp. 74, 76; Ring, 1985, p. 37). The Light (as opposed to figures of light) may be seen before the NDEr leaves his or her body (e.g., Moody, 1975, p. 24; Morse, 1990, pp. 123-24, 129); after leaving the body but before passing through a tunnel or void (e.g., Moody, 1975, pp. 24, 62-63, 75, 139-40; Morse, 1990, p. 121), after passing through a tunnel or void (e.g., Morse, 1990, pp. 40, 95, 120, 141, 153, 155), in the other

world (Morse, 1990, p. 153), or perhaps in more than one place (Ring & Franklin, 1981, p. 202).²

Such variations among persons in the sequence of experienced events cannot easily be attributed to personal life history and accrued symbolic associations, or to personal expectations or wishful thinking. A simpler explanation is the nonordinary realities interpretation of the NDE. The NDE is thought to be an interactive journey through other realities that is produced by the responses of the “other world” to the NDEr as well as the NDEr’s own decisions.

Subculture-specific, Learned Belief

*learned
beliefs
and
interpretations*

Learned spiritual beliefs that vary among subcultures of the Euro-American tradition, such as religious denomination or whether a person is an atheist, are thought to not affect the general or specific kinds of events or places that Euro-Americans perceive in NDEs. Beliefs are thought to affect only the *interpretations* of perceptions (Moody, 1975, p. 59; Ring, 1979; 1985, pp. 45-47). Thus, typically, the Light may be interpreted as God, Jesus, an angel (Moody, 1975, pp. 59, 62; Ring, 1980, pp. 57-60), or perhaps a relative (Ring & Franklin, 1981, p. 202). The tunnel may be interpreted as the Valley of the Shadow of Death (Moody, 1975, p. 34). However, some Euro-American cases do show that perceptions as well as interpretations of events or places vary with belief. For example, the Light has been perceived as Jesus in much detail (Ring, 1980, p. 59), or as a “wonderfully kind face” (Morse, 1990, p. 124). This intra-cultural variation is reasonable, given analogous crosscultural variations in perceived places and events that accord with cultural world view and belief, as will be shown later.

Pan-human Biology

Various pan-human physiological and neurological factors have been hypothesized to cause one or more core features of NDEs—features presumed to be invariant across cultures. The factors are well summarized and critiqued by Groth-Marnat and Schumaker (1989, p. 121), Ring (1980, pp. 210-17), and Greyson and Bush (1993). They include cerebral anoxia and hypercarbia, disruption of oxygen transfer at the enzymatic level, phosphenes, limbic lobe dysfunction, trauma-triggered endorphin production associated with limbic lobe activation, temporal lobe dysfunction, and sensory isolation.

The most embracing and well-documented neurophysiological explanation of NDEs is trauma-produced electrical stimulation of the

Sylvian fissure of the right temporal lobe. Artificial stimulation of various areas of the Sylvian fissure has been shown by several researchers (Morse, 1990, pp. 102-10; Penfield, 1958) to allow and/or produce most core features of NDEs in Euro-American and Chilean populations. The features experienced include leaving the body, seeing dead friends and relatives, zooming up a tunnel, seeing "God," having a panoramic life review, and hearing beautiful music.

One possible interpretation of these data is that the Sylvian fissure acts as a "neurophysiological program" that provides the biological foundation or capacity for having core NDE features, and perhaps is responsible for the consistent sequence of places within Euro-American NDEs. The specific events, places, and affective tone of an NDE would derive from personal life-experience memories, as well as stored, culturally learned beliefs and symbols, which are "loaded" into and structured by the neurophysiological program upon trauma. An analog would be the pan-human neurophysiological foundation for conceptualization, symbolization, and the general grammatical structure of languages that the inferior parietal lobule and other parts of the brain provide (Blakeslee, 1991; D'Aquilli, 1972; Pinker, 1991), as distinguished from the culturally-learned content and specific structure of a language. Alternatively, or in complement, the Sylvian fissure might act as the organ that opens or closes a person's consciousness to the nonordinary reality of the death space. An analog would be the pan-human neurophysiological foundation for the opening of the mind to nonordinary realities during trance induction (Winkelman, 1986).

*Sylvian
fissure
interpretation*

Other factors that are responsible for consistency in Euro-American NDEs, though they contribute to variation crossculturally, include culture-specific learned beliefs and symbols, and culture-specific perceptions or projections that are not learned (Table 1). The effects of these factors become apparent in the following comparison of Euro-American NDEs to Tibetan DEs as described in Tibetan literature and known as the "books of the dead."

THE DEATH EXPERIENCE IN THE TIBETAN BOOKS OF THE DEAD

Historical Sources of the Books of the Dead

The Tibetan books of the dead are a series of orally transmitted accounts and written texts of the more interpretive Mahayana Buddhist tradition, and specifically its northern, mystical, Vajrayana or Tantric path to "instantaneous enlightenment" (Nielsen et al., 1988, pp. 221, 247-50; Evans-Wentz, 1960, pp. lxvi, lxxxv; Lodö, pp. xii-xiii). These books describe the dying, between-life, and rebirth processes, as revealed through enlightened lamas.

The books of the dead derive from several variant schools of thought in Mahayana Tibetan Buddhism (Lauf, 1989, pp. 3-12). The two most central, to which most other sects can be associated, are the *rNying-ma-pa* school and the *dGe-lugs-pa* school. These two schools correspond to two different waves of transmission of Indian Buddhism to Tibet during the eighth and eleventh centuries A.D. (Nielsen, et al., 1988, pp. 247-50; Snelgrove & Richardson, 1980). The *rNying-ma-pa* and *dGe-lugs-pa* schools each have their own, somewhat varying accounts of the death process.

several
versions
of
books
of
the
dead

Several written versions of books of the dead, of both schools of Buddhist thought, have been translated into English. The text that is most well-known in the West is Evans-Wentz's (1935, 1960) translation, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, which comprises only seven of the seventeen chapters of the entire work, the *Bardo thos-grol chen-mo*, from the *rNying-ma-pa* school. This text focuses on the "intermediate" experiences of between-life and rebirth (the *Chos-nyid* and *Srid-pa'i Bardos*). A similar but less well-known work is Fremantle and Trungpa's (1975) translation of the *Bardo thos-grol chen-mo*. Also less consulted is Lama Lodö's (1982) summary of texts about the dying experience (*'Chi-kha'i Bardo*), and rebirth (*Srid-pa'i Bardo*). From the *dGe-lugs-pa* tradition, Lati and Hopkins (1985) have translated texts that describe the entire process from dying through rebirth. Information from Evans-Wentz's, Lama Lodö's, and Lati and Hopkins' translations, of both traditions, is synthesized here and compared to Euro-American NDEs.

The existence of several Tibetan Buddhist accounts of death contrasts with traditional Tibetan lore and the popular American view, including the view given in literature on NDEs (e.g., Moody, 1975, pp. 119-22) that there is only one book of the dead, the *Bardo thos-grol chen-mo*. It is attributed to the *rNying-ma-pa* yogi, Padma-Sambhava, who brought Tantric Buddhism to Tibet.³

Purpose of the Books of the Dead

The views of death presented in the books of the dead are said to derive from enlightened yogis and lamas who, through their meditative practices, remembered past lives, between-deaths, and rebirths. The information also is said to come from enlightened lamas who were reborn with a conscious stream of awareness of their past lives, deaths, and rebirths (Evans-Wentz, 1960, p. liv).

The books of the dead were written in order to guide the religiously less-well trained person through the dying, death, and rebirth processes so that he or she might grow during them and be reincarnated with greater awareness and a better life in this world or in one of the

higher planes of consciousness. A book of the dead was read to the dying and deceased person by their guru, a lama, or a brother over a period of usually 28 to 49 days (Becker, 1985, p. 15) to remind the person of their nature as human, what they were experiencing, and the means by which they might grow in consciousness. *Bardo thos-grol chen-mo* literally means “liberation by hearing on the after-death plane.”

In the ideal case of the person who had intensively practiced yogic meditation during life, it was hoped that they might be guided to recognize that everything in life and death is illusory in being dualistic, so that they might become an enlightened Buddha. In the case of a person less proficient at meditation, it was hoped that they might be guided through the death and rebirth processes with an unbroken stream of consciousness. This would allow them to consciously remember their past lives and learned lessons in their next life. This liberating process is called the “transference.” It was achieved through a practice called *Phowa*, in which the life-force is moved out through the top of the head, used in conjunction with the reading of a book of the dead (Lodö, 1987, pp. 9-10).

The books of the dead also taught the living how to grow in consciousness during life and to prepare in life for growth during death. This is so because the death process described in the books of the dead is analogous to and serves as a model for Tantric meditation (i.e., deity yoga or Highest Yoga Tantra of the *dGe-lugs-pa* school; the Dzogchen Tantra of the *rNying-ma-pa* school) during life (Evans-Wentz, 1960, p. 90; Lati & Hopkins, 1985, pp. 69-73). According to these teachings, Tantric meditation is the quickest path to liberation, allowing a capable person to become an enlightened Buddha in one lifetime. At the same time, Tantric meditation serves as preparation for death and liberation during death. Specifically, it is thought preferable for a person to die in the neutral meditative state of *samadhi* practiced in life, because the quality of one’s between-life experience and next life depends on the quality of one’s mind and the form of desires being thought at the point of death (Evans-Wentz, 1960, p. xv; Lati & Hopkins, 1985, pp. 8-10).

*Tantric
meditation
as
preparation
for
death*

This relevance of the books of the dead to life is clear from the accurate usage of the term, “bardo.” In the West, “bardo” is commonly and mistakenly used to refer to only the period between lives—the “intermediate state.” However, it more accurately refers to any of six analogous, constantly changing, transitional, illusory, dualistic realities or states of consciousness: waking, dreaming, profound meditation, dying, experiencing Reality between lives, and rebirth (Evans-Wentz, 1960, p. lxi; Lodö, 1987, pp. 1-2; Lati & Hopkins, 1985, p. 20; Sogyal, 1992, pp. 11, 342-49). Enlightenment, or liberation, is possible at any juncture in any of these bardos through similar means, including practices described in the books

of the dead, because all of the bardos share the fundamental quality of being transitional. In other words, thought in the bardos is not, in actuality, continuous, and the natural mind of Clear Light can be unveiled at any moment of transition through a shift in one's awareness.

Overview of the Dying and Death Processes

*the
state
of
absolute
Mind
beyond
duality*

Tibetan books of the dead, in combination, describe the nature of three of the bardos. First is the '*Chi-kha'i Bardo* of dying and the initial moment of death. In this state, the earthly body and coarser aspects of mind "dissolve" and the pure consciousness of the natural, discarnate, quiescent mind—the Clear Light—breaks into consciousness, or "dawns," and is experienced. There is the opportunity to unite with it to manifest the state of absolute Mind beyond duality, called "*Dharma-kaya*" (Evans-Wentz, 1960, pp. 90, 96; Sogyal, 1992, p. 343), i.e., "Perfect Enlightened Buddhahood," "Voidness," or "Oneness." Second is the '*Chos-nyid Bardo* of between-life. In this state, the deceased experiences having a psychically projected body resembling their previous physical body. They perceive karmically-produced, projected, dualistic polarities of the unconscious mind—the Peaceful and Wrathful Buddhas and knowledge-holding deities. Third is the '*Srid-pa'i Bardo* of between-life and rebirth. In this state, the deceased experiences having a psychically projected body composed of subtle matter and resembling their earthly body of either their former or next life. This body is called the "enjoyment," "desire," "smell-eater" or "seeker of existence" body (Lati & Hopkins, 1985, pp. 52, 55). In the '*Srid-pa'i Bardo*, the deceased desires and searches for a more substantial earthly body, leading to rebirth. During this search, the deceased faces increasingly more terrifying, karmically-produced, desire-based projections. Vajrayana Buddhism teaches that all of these experiences, save *Dharma-kaya*, are illusory, being "thought-form" projections of the dualistic mind. So, too, are the other bardo states of waking, dreaming, and meditation. This point is relevant to interpreting crosscultural variation in NDEs and DEs as states of consciousness (see below).

The '*Chi-kha'i* and '*Chos-nyid Bardos* are essentially a sequence of "tests" of a person's understanding of and meditative experience in the nature of Reality and the nature of one's true Self, beyond the ego-self. The "tests" are learning experiences that provide the person opportunities to grow in awareness of Reality and the Self. At the same time, the "tests" sort persons according to their development into seven different vertically positioned planes of reality or consciousness, which define the quality of their between-life and next life experiences. The planes of reality are Buddhahood (*nirvana*, in Evans-Wentz's older terms) and the six lower, dualistic

levels, or “lokas,” of this world of *samsara*: those of the gods/“devas” (heaven), titans, humans, animals/“brutes,” unhappy ghosts, and hell. In this way, the Buddhist death process implicitly maintains the purity of different realities in the cosmic system, as does the death process explicitly in the world views of many other cultures (e.g., Budge, 1960; Isaacs, 1980, pp. 228-29; Neumann, 1990; Pasricha & Stevenson, 1986; Plato, 1953; Swedenbourg, 1966; Zaleski, 1987), through a “judgment” or other means.

Learning and sorting occur in the following manner. In the '*Chi-kha'i* and *Chos-nyid Bardos*, over a series of days, the person experiences levels of their consciousness, from their highest or essential Mind to lower aspects of their mind, which manifest karmically accrued latencies. Each aspect of mind is perceived as a light or as a Buddha emitting a light from his heart. If the person recognizes one of the lights early in the first eight days of the sequence as an aspect of themselves and can hold fast to it mentally, they may dwell at the pleasant level of consciousness of that light indefinitely as a Bodhisattva, with a good chance to progress to Buddhahood/Nirvana. On the other hand, the person might be frightened and run from a light, or be attracted to a duller, simultaneously perceived light of a lower level of consciousness that manifests karmically accrued latencies and that is associated with one of the planes of *samsara*. Or the person might be confused and not be able to hold on mentally to the light. In these cases, the person experiences progressively lower and darker levels of their consciousness until some familiar level is reached. They have a remaining between-life experience and rebirth at that level of consciousness.

*each
aspect
of
mind
is
perceived
as a
light*

In the '*Chi-kha'i*, *Chos-nyid*, and *Srid-pa'i* bardos, being free of a body, a person's consciousness is flexible. This allows the reader of a book of the dead to guide the deceased through the above “tests” and the three bardos in hopefully a more conscious way, so that the deceased might grow. Consciousness in the three bardos is frequently symbolized in Tibetan literature by a red-hot iron bar, which is malleable until it cools and solidifies into form at conception (Lodö, 1987, p. 48).

The *rNying-ma-pa* and *dGe-lugs-pa* schools of Tibetan Buddhism differ in their descriptions of the dying and death processes in four primary ways. (1) The *rNying-ma-pa* school believes that, after the dissolution of the earthly body and coarser aspects of mind, the Clear Light dawns twice for the common person. In *dGe-lugs-pa* descriptions, the Clear Light appears only once. (2) The *Chos-nyid* bardo of the Peaceful and Wrathful Buddhas and knowledge-holding deities is described in only the *rNying-ma-pa* school. (3) Both the *rNying-ma-pa* and *dGe-lugs-pa* schools hold to a model of dying whereby the process of dissolution of the earthly

four
differences
between
the
two
schools

body and coarser aspects of the mind produces a sequence of experiences (e.g., seeing mirages, smoke, sparks) that culminate in the dawning of the Clear Light, which is death. This “forward dissolution” is then experienced in reverse order, leading to the “reaggregation” of a more subtle, between-life body. However, according to the *rNying-ma-pa* school, dissolution and reaggregation occur only once, in the *'Chi-kha'i* and *Chos-nyid* bardos, respectively. According to the *dGe-lugs-pa* school, dissolution occurs in the *'Chi-kha'i* bardo and reaggregation in the *Srid-pa'i* Bardo, followed by up to six more “small deaths” of dissolution and reaggregation in the *Srid-pa'i* Bardo. The last “death” leads to physical rebirth. (4) In the *rNying-ma-pa* school, the subtle body of the deceased in the *Chos-nyid* and *Srid-pa'i Bardos* is thought to have a form similar to the previous earthly body. In the *dGe-lugs-pa* school, the subtle body in the *Srid-pa'i Bardo* is thought by some to have a form similar to the future earthly body. Others hold that early subtle bodies of the deceased have a form similar to the previous earthly body, whereas later subtle bodies have a form similar to the future earthly body (Lati & Hopkins, 1985, p. 55). These four differences between the two schools are pointed out below as information about the books of the dead is summarized and integrated.

The Dying and Death Processes

Dying and the 'Chi-kha'i Bardo. The process of transition between the waking bardo in life and the *'Chi-kha'i Bardo* is described in detail in *dGe-lugs-pa* texts translated by Lati & Hopkins (1985) and less fully by Lodö (1987) in the *rNying-ma-pa* tradition.

In essence, dying involves the sequential “dissolution” of the several life-bearing winds and then the several aspects of mind. The life-bearing winds, which range from breathed air to subtler currents of energy, perform the bodily functions and serve as the “mounts” for consciousness. The dissolution of a coarser wind allows a subtler wind to manifest, both externally as physiological signs of dying and internally as a perception.

The dissolution of the first four winds, which are associated with the four elements of earth, water, fire, and air, respectively bring the appearance of mirages, smoke, sparks within smoke, and a sputtering butter-lamp to the dying person’s mind (Lati & Hopkins, 1985, pp. 16-17). Alternatively, they bring the sequential appearance of female Buddhas and colors associated with the elements (Lodö, 1987, pp. 3-4). Kinesthetically, the four dissolutions bring the feelings that everything is falling apart from earthquakes, being flooded by water, burning, and then being blown away by winds (Lodö, 1987, pp. 4-5). The fifth through seventh dissolutions in-

volve the sequential opening of the seventh, second and third, and fourth chakras (Lati & Hopkins, 1985, pp. 42-43). These openings allow the gathering of winds at the heart, the downward migration of one's male essence (the white drop, or *bindu*) obtained from one's father's semen, the upward migration of one's female essence (the red drop, or *bindu*) obtained from one's mother's blood, the meeting of these essences in the heart, and, consequently, the simultaneous dissolution of coarser to subtler aspects of mind (Lati & Hopkins, 1985, pp. 13-20, 30). During the fifth through seventh dissolutions, the thirty-three coarse "conceptions," the forty middling conceptions, and the seven more subtle "conceptions" of the mind dissolve. Some examples of these conceptions include lack of desire, sorrow, fear, thirst, shame, pride, heroism, depression, and laziness. Lodö (1987, p. 5) calls the coarse, middling, and subtle conceptions angers, desires, and kinds of ignorance. As the coarse, middling, and subtle conceptions dissolve, the dying person respectively perceives a vacuity sequentially filled with white light, red light, and thick darkness. These are called the subtle minds of "white appearance," "red appearance" and "black near-attainment" (Lati & Hopkins, 1985, pp. 38-41). The white light of the fifth dissolution is slightly dualistic. Thus, it seems to correspond in form, though not its order of appearance, to the Light perceived in Euro-American NDEs. The white light is believed to occur when breathing has stopped yet the person's consciousness is still within their physical body. The thick darkness of the seventh dissolution has an analog in the dark void in Euro-American NDEs. The eighth dissolution involves the coming to rest of all but the most subtle life-bearing winds and transforming of the drops. These processes bring the dawning of the nondualistic Clear Light. The appearance of the Clear Light is often likened to the dawning of a crisp, open autumn sky in Buddhist literature. However, in the *Bardo thos-grol chen-mo*, the Clear Light is also called the "dazzlement" and is likened to a vibrant landscape in springtime (Evans-Wentz, 1960, p. lxxiii). This metaphor resembles some Euro-American NDEr's descriptions of the "portal to heaven," yet so do some descriptions of some planes of the *Srid-pa'i Bardo* much later in the death process (Lodö, 1987, p. 46; see below). The appearance of the Clear Light constitutes the actual point of death and begins the *'Chi-kha'i Bardo* (Lati & Hopkins, 1985, p. 45).

*the
eight
dissolutions*

A person may remain more or less conscious through the above dying process, depending on how practiced they are in yogic meditation. Skillful meditators are said to experience a "swoon"—a temporary loss of consciousness—during the second half of the dawning of the mind of near-black attainment (Evans-Wentz, 1960, pp. 29, 44; Lati & Hopkins, 1985, p. 44). Their consciousness is regained with the dawning of the Clear Light. For the common person, the swoon extends throughout the entire period during which the mind of near-black attainment is revealed and the Clear

Light dawns, lasting about three and a half days (Evans-Wentz, 1960, p. 93). It is said that the Clear Light dawns, but is not perceived. Thus, the person is unaware that they are making a transition between life and death and “awakes” to the next, *Chos-nyid Bardo*, not knowing that they have died. Analogously, some Euro-American NDErs do not think that they are dying and out of their body, initially, when having an out-of-body experience.

The books of the dead teach that each of the transitions between the bardos of waking, experiencing reality, and rebirth (Evans-Wentz, 1960, p. 29), as well as before and after the bardo of sleeping and dreaming (Lati & Hopkins, 1985, p. 20), are constituted by the forward dissolution and then reaggregation into a physical, subtle, or dream-body, as relevant. Thus, each bardo is separated from others by a swoon. This belief concords well with the occurrence of the dark void in Euro-American NDEs, its occurrence in multiple possible positions within a NDE (Figure 1), and the interpretation of the void as the mind’s representation of a transition between states of consciousness (Ring, 1980, p. 238).

*ideally,
the
guru
or
a lama
reads
to
them*

Ideally, as the Clear Light dawns, the guru of the deceased or a lama, who has meditatively been tracking their progress, reads to them the portions of a book of the dead that describe this experience and its meaning. The person is reminded of their meditative practices, told that they and the Light are inseparable, and encouraged to recognize the Light as their true self and unite with it so as to create *Dharma-kaya* and be liberated. However, most persons, if they witness the Clear Light at all, cannot do this because they lack practice in Tantric meditation and have not learned how to focus their mind. Ego thoughts, karmically produced thoughts, or weeping relatives may distract the deceased. Also, the deceased may simply be confused as to whether they are living or dead (Evans-Wentz, 1960, p. 157). Thus, a small quiver occurs inside the person’s body, the very subtle life-bearing wind and consciousness passes from the heart through any of several exits to the outside, and the Clear Light fades (Lati & Hopkins, 1985, p. 49; but see Lodö, 1987, p. 11).

In the *rNying-ma-pa* tradition (Evans-Wentz, 1960, pp. 97-101), the person experiences a second Clear Light, somewhat dimmed by their karma, about a “mealtime” later. At this stage, attaining Buddhahood/Nirvana by uniting with the Light is still possible.

The Chos-nyid Bardo. Following the dawning of the Clear Light, for those who do not perceive it or recognize it or cannot hold fast to it, the dissolution process is reversed. The deceased awakens to either the *Chos-nyid Bardo*, according to the *rNying-ma-pa* tradition, or the *Srid-pa’i Bardo*, according to the *dGe-lugs-pa* tradition.

The person perceives himself to have a subtle body similar in form to that in their previous life.

In the *Chos-nyid Bardo*, the deceased experiences karmically-produced apparitions, i.e., predispositions of their mind due to their past actions. These are the Peaceful deities from one's heart (fourth chakra), the Knowledge-holding deities from one's throat (fifth chakra), and the Wrathful deities from one's brain (sixth chakra) (Lodö 1987, p. 40). These deities are experienced over fourteen days.

The first apparitions to appear are the five Peaceful Buddha deities in divine (Tantric) embrace with their consorts and accompanied by their Bodhisattva retinues. The Buddhas arise one by one, and then jointly in a mandala configuration with other deities, over six days. Each represents a "realm" of the mind, which is associated with a different cardinal direction and element. Each Buddha emits from its heart a light of a different color which flows into the heart of the deceased.⁴ Each light represents a different form of wisdom, which is the antidote to one of the five psychological "poisons" of ignorance, anger, pride, greed, and jealousy, respectively (Lodö, 1987, pp. 29, 35). One or more alternative, duller lights associated with various planes of *samsara* and poisons appear simultaneously with each Buddha. The person thus has the opportunity to choose between and merge with higher or lower levels of their consciousness and to grow in consciousness with the meditative guidance of their guru or lama. With these lights also come the sounds of a thousand thunders, which the person is told are their own and therefore, need not be frightened. The person is encouraged by their guru or lama each day to merge their consciousness with the perceived Buddha, that they might obtain Buddhahood and spend their remaining, between-life time in the peaceful, divine realm of mind associated with that Buddha.

*the
person
is
encouraged
to
merge
their
consciousness*

On the seventh day, the person perceives fifty-two Knowledge-holding deities who send forth various colored lights. The Knowledge-holding deities are neither peaceful nor wrathful (Lodö, 1987, p. 37). Also perceived is the alternative duller light of the plane of animals. The person thus again faces a choice between states of mind. They are encouraged to merge with one of the Knowledge-holding deities, that they might spend their remaining, between-life time in one of the *samsaric* heavens (pure Paradise Realms or pure lands) associated with that deity.

Those who cannot identify with the Peaceful Buddha deities are next confronted with the blood-drinking Wrathful deities for seven days. First appear the five Wrathful Buddha deities, one by one, in divine embrace or dancing with their consorts. Each Wrathful

appearance
of
the
Lord
of
Death

Buddha is the dark side of one of the Peaceful Buddhas. The Wrathful Buddhas appear in the same order as their Peaceful counterparts. The person is instructed to recognize these, too, as aspects of their consciousness, and to unite with them. In merging with a Wrathful Buddha, the person will obtain Buddhahood and spend their remaining, between-life time in the peaceful, divine realm of mind associated with the Peaceful counterpart of the Wrathful Buddha. In running away, the person will only fall into deeper and more terrifying levels of the intermediate state. The analog to this process in contemporary psychosynthesis and archetypal depth psychology is meeting and integrating one's shadow, the dark sides of one's anima and animus, one's inner critic, and one's various demons. On the thirteenth and fourteenth days, the person who has not recognized the darker sides of themselves represented by the Wrathful Buddhas perceives fifty-eight other Wrathful deities (including eight Gaurima, eight Takenma, four doorkeepers and twenty-eight Wang Chuk Ma). If these are not recognized, then all of the Wrathful deities appear jointly as the Lord of Death. The Lord of Death dismembers the person, who, despite great pain, cannot die. This symbolizes the difficulty of extinguishing the lesser, ego-self as the person clings to this self-image.

The Srid-pa'i Bardo. In the *rNying-ma-pa* tradition, those who have not recognized or been able to unite with the lights or deities of the '*Chi-kha'i* or *Chos-nyid Bardos*, or who have fled them in fear, owing to their bad karma, plunge to the lower and lower levels of consciousness of the *Srid-pa'i Bardo*. The *Srid-pa'i Bardo* is a twilight-like, hazy state of consciousness not unlike the "gray," "murky," "confusing" void described by some Euro-American NDErs who have attempted suicide (see above; also Sogyal, 1992, pp. 328-29). Also, many of the experiences of the deceased in this *bardo* have analogs in positive Euro-American NDEs. The following description of the *Srid-pa'i Bardo* is summarized from Evans-Wentz (1960), unless indicated otherwise.

In the *Srid-pa'i Bardo*, the person finds that they have a body similar in form to that in their previous life, but of extraordinary powers. All senses are heightened. The person is capable of traveling instantly wherever they wish, passing through solids, and shape-shifting (Evans-Wentz, 1960, pp. 158-59). Yet the person does not realize they are dead. The person sees his or her home and relatives in mourning and tries to contact them and convince them that he or she is still alive. When communication is impossible and the person feels like an outcast, the person comes to realize for the first time that they are dead.

Being pure consciousness, which the person has not yet learned how to calm and control, they are unable to rest in one place. The person visits their old haunts but is not able to loiter. They are

blown in various directions as is a leaf by fierce blasts of snow or rain-filled winds—the winds of their own karma. They see apparitions, hear threatening voices that say “strike, slay,” and terrifying loud noises like mountains crumbling, angry overflowing seas, and roaring fires (i.e., the four elements). The person runs to the edge of deep, fearful precipices, and feels like they are being squeezed into the cracks of a rock. All of these experiences are aspects of the person’s mind (e.g., anger, lust, stupidity). The person desires to enter a body and tries to get into bodies repeatedly, but finds them frozen, cremated, or decomposed.

The person is then judged by the Lord of Death and two “Geniuses” (guardian beings) who count out the person’s good and bad deeds with white and black pebbles. Lying about one’s deeds is not possible because the Lord of Death, who is symbolic of one’s guilt, looks into the Mirror of Karma, where one’s deeds are vividly reflected, which is symbolic of one’s memory. The Lord of Death then again dismembers the person who, despite intense pain, cannot die. This situation represents the difficulty that one’s ego has in dealing with the dark sides of oneself.

Next, the person sees their own funeral and division of inheritance. Interference in these matters will cause the person to be born in the plane of unhappy ghosts or Hell. In contrast, those who have accumulated good karma have delightful experiences throughout the *Srid-pa’i Bardo*. For example, they may experience being inside a heavenly palace, in a tall building or on a throne (Lodö, 1987, p. 46). Finally, as rebirth approaches, colors associated with the six planes of *samsara* shine from them. The person is attracted to the color of the plane in which they are to be reborn and experiences entering a corresponding landscape, such as a heavenly palace, a lovely garden, a place of natural beauty, a cave, or a heap of burning wood (Lodö, 1987, p. 46). The person’s subtle body fades and takes on the color of that plane of rebirth.

*rebirth
and
colors
associated
with
samsara*

Importantly, as the person passes through lower and lower levels of the *Chos-nyid* and *Srid-pa’i Bardos*, there is a change in the means by which release can be obtained from experiences in those levels into more pleasant levels or states of mind. Knowledge of the Self and meditation are effective in the first thirteen days of the *Chos-nyid Bardo*. Devotion, faith, and prayer are effective when facing the Lord of Death on the fourteenth day. Remembering compassion is effective in the *Srid-pa’i Bardo*. *This sequence expresses the relative values that Tibetan Buddhism places on knowledge/discrimination, meditation, devotion, and love as different paths to Oneness.* Likewise, the Peaceful deities of the *Chos-nyid Bardo* that first appear are Buddhas that represent the highest realms of the mind, whereas later come the Knowledge-holding deities from the lower throat and heart centers. The relative values placed by Ti-

betan Buddhism on the various paths to Oneness differ from those expressed in Christianity and Euro-American NDEs (see below).

In the final phases of the *Srid-pa'i Bardo*, the person comes to enter a womb and is reborn. There are several more or less desirable means for entering a womb. These are beyond the scope of this article.

the
search
for
a
birthplace

Contrasting with the above, *rNying-ma-pa* description of the *Srid-pa'i Bardo*, which is given in Evans-Wentz (1960) and Lodö (1987), is the brief *dGe-lugs-pa* view presented in Lati and Hopkins (1985, pp. 19, 49-51). In this version, the *Srid-pa'i Bardo* lasts anywhere from a moment to seven days, during which the person in their "smell-eater" body searches for odors for nourishment and an appropriate womb for rebirth. The form of the smell-eater body is similar to either the previous or future earthly body of the deceased (see above). If the person does not find an appropriate birthplace by the end of seven days, they undergo a "small death" of forward dissolution and reaggregation and are reborn into a second *Srid-pa'i Bardo*. The search for a birthplace continues. The cycle of search, death, and rebirth is repeated up to seven times, i.e., forty-nine days, until an appropriate birthplace is found.

MAHAYANA TIBETAN BUDDHIST AND CONTEMPORARY EURO-AMERICAN CHRISTIAN WORLD VIEWS

As preparation for understanding differences between Euro-American NDEs and Tibetan bardo experiences in their tone and content, it is necessary to summarize some basic ways in which Mahayana Tibetan Buddhist and contemporary Euro-American, Christian world views differ. At least some of the systematic contrasts between Euro-American NDEs and Tibetan bardo experiences correlate with differences in culturally learned world views.

The characterizations of Tibetan Buddhist and Christian world views drawn here are derived more so from the basic teachings, spiritual vehicles and experiences, and deeds of their founders and/or early followers, which are the essential cornerstones of the traditions, than from subsequent theological interpretations and creeds. These essentials are more likely to relate to Euro-American NDEs and Tibetan bardo experiences.

Christianity is a very diverse religion (Smith, 1986, p. 409; Nielsen et al., 1989), having many sects with differing beliefs about the nature of death and the cosmos, and having changed through time in these beliefs. However, the essentials of the tradition—specifically the primary teachings of Christ and the spiritual experiences of the Apostles and early Christians (Smith, 1986, pp. 412-33)—

are also among the central themes of various liberal Christian movements in America today and over the last few decades. It is these essential Christian themes within this recent period that are most appropriate to our study, because this is the time from which the Euro-American NDEs examined here are drawn. Temporal correspondence of the studied NDEs and beliefs is necessary if the various possible synchronic and diachronic, evolutionary relationships between culturally learned world views, expectations, perceived near-death experiences, and interpreted experiences are to be untangled (Peay, 1991; Ring, 1985).

There are two fundamental ways in which Tibetan Buddhism and contemporary Euro-American Christianity differ and which are reflected in bardo experiences and NDEs. These are the different emphases placed on (1) meditation and knowledge of the self and reality versus love of others, and (2) karma and moral judgment versus forgiveness.

Meditation, Knowledge, and Love

All of the major world religions offer perennial wisdoms on the nature of life, reality, and the self. Among these is the existence of an essential state of Oneness (e.g., the Hindu Brahman, the Buddhist *Dharma-kaya*, the Judeo-Christian God, the Sufi Hidden Essence) that transcends the dualism and separations of this material world in time and space. Each of the major religions also offers a series of paths for participating in or achieving Oneness. These include the Paths of Knowledge, Meditation or Contemplation, Love, Devotion, and Service. In Hinduism, these five paths are classified as the four “yogas,” literally means for yoking or joining with Oneness. They include the *Jnana* yoga of intellectual discrimination, the *Raja* yoga of meditation, the *Bhakti* yoga of heartfelt love and devotion to a deity and/or other humans, and the *Karma* yoga of work and service in the world (Nielsen et al., 1988; Walsh, 1989).

*five
paths*

Although each of the major world religious traditions considers each of the five paths to Oneness, the different traditions emphasize the different paths to varying degrees. Also, emphases have shifted within traditions as they have developed through time. In the starkest contrast, it can be said that Mahayana Tibetan Buddhism focuses on the paths of knowledge and meditation, whereas contemporary Christianity focuses on the path of essential, unconditional love. This contrast can be seen as follows.

The most fundamental teaching of Buddhism, Buddha’s First Noble Truth, is that life is suffering, *dukkha*. Suffering includes

both physical and psychological pain. It derives from the ego's (relative mind's) resistance to change—the ego's desire-based attachments to things of life that are essentially impermanent. Suffering also derives from the ego's self-grasping and self-cherishing nature, when in fact the self is impermanent. Third, suffering originates in unenlightened perception of things within categories and as separate rather than as essentially one. Finally, suffering derives from the chains of interdependent actions that link persons and animals to each other's misdeeds and suffering.

Being ultimately mental-perceptual in nature, suffering can be overcome by awakening to and coming to know the nature of the self and reality. The most fundamental vehicle for this transformation is experiencing the Oneness of the absolute mind—the Clear Light, Ground Luminosity, or *Rigpa* (Sogyal, 1992, pp. 47, 259-61, 342-44). This is achieved primarily through the Paths of Meditation and Knowledge, rather than the Path of Love.

Love is recognized in Tibetan Buddhism through the practice of compassion: the empathic identification with the suffering of others. Like meditation, compassion is an essential means that Buddhism uses to face suffering and find Oneness. Through compassion for the other and then all sentient beings, attention is shifted away from the self-cherishing, self-grasping, divisive nature of the ego (Sogyal, 1992, pp. 189-90) to the greater Whole. The practice of extending "loving kindness" to others, i.e., the path of Love, is one means for developing compassion (Sogyal, 1992, pp. 195-96). The Bodhisattva epitomizes this practice. Ultimately, however, developing compassion requires a *mental* shift in understanding and perception, which can be achieved through reframing practices such as mirroring and empathy, and which requires meditation (e.g. Levine, 1987; Sogyal, 1992, pp. 196-202). The absolute mind must be unveiled and Oneness experienced through meditation for a fully compassionate relationship to be realized and suffering to be overcome. Even a good heart can be obscured by the confusion of the mind. Meditation disarms the heart of the relative mind's illusions and allows sincere compassion to rise. Thus, in Buddhism, the journey of the heart is envisioned as a part of the path of knowledge and meditation, rather than as the primary path of transformation.

compassion
requires
mental
shift

In contrast to Tibetan Buddhism's emphasis on meditation, Christianity emphasizes essential, unconditional love, or what early Christians called *agape*, as the path to Oneness. Love received from God and extended toward all neighbors regardless of their qualities (Smith, 1986, p. 415) is the primary vehicle for altering one's perception of reality and overcoming separation. Christ's ministry was founded on his overwhelming love for people and deeds of loving kindness, including healing and counselling, which drew his

followers to him (Smith, 1986, pp. 412-14). The Buddha's ministry emphasized right mindfulness and right absorption (i.e., meditation) as fundamental to right knowledge, aspiration, speech, behavior, livelihood, and effort (Smith, 1986).

The difference between Tibetan Buddhism and essential Christianity in their emphasis on paths toward Oneness is directly reflected in their broadest views of the nature of reality. In Buddhism, ultimately the one true reality is Mind, the formless unconditioned Truth and Light of *Dharma-kaya* (Becker, 1985, p. 6; Sogyal, 1992, pp. 342-43). In a contrasting focus in Christianity, God's "infinite Love" is central. The universe is basically friendly and safe in that God provides each person their needs through His love (Smith, 1986, p. 417), which is the source from which a Christian can love and help all others unconditionally. This loving warmth and safety of the Christian cosmos is one reason for the joy that is said to have pervaded the lives of early Christians (Smith, 1986, p. 428). A loving and joyful cosmos is also emphasized in some contemporary, New Age Christian movements and in older, charismatic Christian sects.⁵ The greater warmth and safety of reality and life in the essential Christian world view compared to that of Tibetan Buddhism is manifested directly and in several ways in Euro-American NDEs compared to the experiences described in Tibetan books of the dead and *'das-log* literature (Epstein, 1982).

Karma, Judgment, and Forgiveness

A second and related way in which Tibetan Buddhism differs from essential and contemporary Christianity is in its concern about karma. Karma literally means "action." The law of karma says in part that the quality of one's future in this life and other lives, including the nature of one's moral being, depends to a great extent on one's current actions. "What you will *be* is what you *do* now," the Buddha said (Sogyal, 1990, pp. 92-93). Thus, karma conceptually links the quality of a person's nature—their moral character—to their actions. By extension, the concept allows the judgment of a person by their deeds. Thus, in the books of the dead, the Lord of Death judges a person by showing them their good and bad deeds in the Mirror of Karma. Finally, as a motivator of behavior, the concept of karma is, in part, at the practical level, linked to fear and guilt.

*what
you
will be
is
what
you do
now*

In contrast, contemporary Christianity focuses on forgiveness as a vehicle for manifesting unconditional love to the other, regardless of their actions. This includes God's forgiveness of all humans, who have already been saved through the Christ. Thus, the person is conceptually separated from his or her deeds and can be loved and accepted unconditionally rather than judged. Smith (1986, pp. 428-30) holds that release from the burden of guilt about one's self-

worth and release from fear of death, which are the correlates of God's forgiveness, are primary reasons for the joy said to epitomize the early Christians.

The distinction of Christianity's emphasis on God's forgiveness and loving acceptance from Tibetan Buddhism's emphasis on karma's fear-inducing judgment is directly reflected in differences between Euro-American NDEs and the DEs reported in the Tibetan books of the dead (see below).

Over the course of the history of Christianity in Europe and America, the Church's interpretation and common man's view of the nature of death and salvation has shifted, with judgment and fear varying in their importance (Ariès, 1981). These ideational shifts generally correspond to the level of fear versus love expressed in European "otherworld journeys" and NDEs of the various periods (Zaleski, 1987). These changes are beyond the scope of this paper.

In sum, Tibetan Buddhism and contemporary Euro-American Christian thought in the United States differ in their emphasis on conceptions of the ultimate nature of the universe as Mind or Love, in the paths to Oneness on which they focus, in the relationship of a person's nature to their actions, and in the roles of judgment and forgiveness in the dynamics of the cosmos. These contrasts in culturally-learned world views are expressed in the tone and some of the content of Euro-American NDEs compared to the experiences described in the Tibetan books of the dead and *'das-log* literature.

contrasts
in
culturally-
learned
world
views

EURO-AMERICAN NEAR-DEATH AND TIBETAN DEATH COMPARED

Limitations to the Comparison

A comparison of Euro-American NDEs to Tibetan DEs described in the books of the dead can be insightful, but only if the nature and limitations of the comparison are clearly understood. First, whereas Euro-American accounts of NDEs are personal descriptions that come as close to phenomenological experience as words allow, accounts of DEs in Tibetan books of the dead may be more distant from phenomenological experience. The books of the dead most probably derive from an oral tradition to which many persons contributed over many generations (Evans-Wentz, 1960, p. 77). The tradition was probably shaped by pre-Buddhist indigenous Bon beliefs, cultural diffusion, and politico-religious motivation (Becker, 1985; Nielsen, 1988) before being set in writing. Thus, the

processes of idealization through the creation of a composite summary of death, stylization within established cultural metaphors, and selective editing or re-emphasis, each could have led to religiously defined descriptions of Tibetan DEs that may no longer fit well with individual phenomenological experience. This limitation has been emphasized in the interpretation of other oral and literary traditions describing otherworld journeys (Epstein, 1982; Zaleski, 1987).

A second limitation to the comparison is that only a few summaries of Tibetan DEs are available for study, in contrast to the many individual variations in Euro-American NDEs. Some differences between the Tibetan and Euro-American experiences are expectable simply from the lack of recorded detail on Tibetan DEs.

A third qualification is that phenomena of possibly distinct origin and function are being compared: *near-death* experiences and supposed *death* experiences. However, similarities presented below in the content and sequence of Euro-American NDEs and Tibetan DEs lend support to the view that the NDE is the beginning of the death process. Moreover, Ring (1984, pp. 258-59) holds that Euro-American NDEs may be a spiritual means for raising human consciousness in our era, which is similar to the intent of the death process in Tibetan Buddhist belief.

Fourth, accounts of Euro-American NDEs describe, at most, only the beginning of death processes, whereas the Tibetan books of the dead describe entire death processes. Consequently, one can expect some phenomena in the Tibetan accounts to not be present in accounts of Euro-American NDEs: specifically, those events and places beyond the "point of no return." Thus, any comparison of the content of Tibetan and Euro-American experiences must be asymmetrical. There can only be a search for the occurrence of phenomena experienced by Tibetans among the phenomena experienced by Euro-Americans, not vice versa. This method is used here.

*an
asymmetrical
comparison*

Finally, the sample of NDEs used to make the comparison is not representative of age, sex, occupation, or other demographic categories within the Euro-American population. Instead, the sample is comprised of previously published, example NDEs that authors have characterized as "typical," "common variants," "unusual variants" or "deep" (Tables 2 - 4). The sample thus maximizes the diversity of kinds of experiences considered and is unlikely to be representative of the relative frequencies of kinds of experiences. This is acceptable because the analysis focuses on similarities and differences in the occurrence, not the relative frequencies, of various kinds of experiences had by Euro-Americans and described for Tibetans.

Table 3 provides an asymmetrical comparison of Tibetan DEs to Euro-American NDEs. Common and rare characteristics of Euro-American NDEs, as discussed by several researchers, and their possible and probable analogs in the Tibetan DE are listed, row by row.

*the
most
clearly
shared
places
and
events*

Some kinds of perceptions are more clearly shared among the experiences of Euro-Americans and Tibetans. If NDEs are interpreted as the beginning of death processes, then these commonalities would stand as candidates for crosscultural universals in the death process. The most clearly shared *places* include: (1) one or more dark voids, sometimes filled with sparkles, (2) another world that takes the form of a *natural* landscape that is filled with light, vibrant in color, and perhaps flowered, (3) a palace or perhaps a city of light within the other world, and (4) a realm of bewildered spirits. The third and fourth features do not occur commonly in Euro-American NDEs and occur in Tibetan DEs only among certain individuals, depending on their karma (Lodö, 1987, p. 46).

The most clearly shared perceived *events* include: (1) hearing loud noises such as a wind or roar early in the death process; (2) seeing religious figures like Buddhas or Jesus; (3) seeing a white or gold Light that is separate from oneself, defining a dualistic state of consciousness; (4) merging with a brilliant Light so as to create a sense of Oneness or *Dharma-kaya*; (5) a life review/judgment; and more generally, (6) events that reveal near-death and death to be learning processes.

Many cognitive, emotional, and sensory experiences are shared among Euro-American NDEs and Tibetan DEs. These include: (1) the realistic quality of the experience; (2) heightening of some or all of the senses; (3) transcendent peace, which is felt by only those of good karma in Tibetan DEs; (4) a sense of floating weightlessly in space or being blown around by a wind; (5) the sense, sometimes, of being controlled in movement by outside forces; (6) the ability at other times to make decisions that control events; (7) initial emotional detachment followed later by (8) emotional involvement; (9) leaving the physical body as a disembodied consciousness, for some Euro-Americans (Ring, 1980, p. 225); (10) finding oneself in a subtle body resembling one's earthly body, for some Euro-Americans (Moody, 1975, p. 42); (11) a desire to get back into one's physical body, for some Euro-Americans; several qualities and capabilities of the subtle body, including (12) an ability to pass through solids; (13) an ability to move over great distances quickly; and (14) a telepathic ability to read the thoughts of the living; (15) causing (16) a feeling of loneliness not being able to talk to humans on earth; (17) an inability to lie during the life review/judgment;

(18) a sense of time being altered to nonexistent; (19) a sense of space being altered to nonexistent; and (20) feeling pulled back to earth by emotional attachments or desires.

Explanations of Similarities within an Evolutionary Perspective

Four explanations, singly or more probably in combination, may account for these crossculturally shared and perhaps universal perceptions. Different sets of explanations may apply to different shared traits. These explanations are (1) the biological, which evokes pan-human neurophysiological factors; (2) the depth psychological, which posits a pan-human, collective unconscious filled with archetypal motifs; (3) the experiential, which evokes pan-human worldly experiences; and (4) the nonordinary reality explanation, which posits the experience of pan-human non-ordinary realities.

To fully appreciate the role of these explanations in understanding potential crosscultural uniformities in the content of NDEs and DEs, it is essential to see that the factors that each explanation evoke bear the *same fundamental relationship to cultural world view*, which also influences the content of NDEs and DEs. This relationship is an *evolutionary* one. Specifically, each explanation posits fundamental kinds of raw experiences—biological, depth psychological, worldly reality, or nonordinary reality—to which all humans are subject in life and/or death. These experiences serve in life as the basis and inspiration for the social creation and evolution of world views, beliefs, and linguistic categories. The contents of these raw experiences are elaborated and modified as they are expressed and given meaning through language, lore, craft, dance, and other cultural expressions in a developmental process. Certain contents are probably also disregarded through cultural and linguistic selection processes. Thus, in life and at death/near-death, *fundamental raw experiences come to be perceived through the filters of cultural world views and beliefs that originated in and may be continuously buttressed by, but may no longer be one-for-one maps of, those same raw experiences* (Goodman, 1988, pp. 170-71; Leary, 1964; Roberts & Owen, 1988, p. 612). Culture as ideation both originates in and modifies the perception of basic experiences, be they biological, depth psychological, worldly experiential, and/or nonordinary reality in origin. Moreover, *if such basic experiences shift systematically through time, one can expect persons and social groups to adjust their world views and beliefs to accord with those experiences to some degree* (e.g., Zaleski, 1987 in relation to Ariès, 1981).

*the
role
of
these
explanations*

For example, it is well documented that raw, biologically and hallucinogenically based phosphene visual patterns can be cultur-

TABLE 3

GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS OF EURO-AMERICAN NDEs¹

COMPARED TO DEATH EXPERIENCES DESCRIBED IN TIBETAN BOOKS OF THE DEAD, REGARDLESS OF SEQUENCE

Present in Euro-American Near-Death Experiences:	Analogous Phenomenon in the Tibetan Books of the Dead:
<i>Places Experienced</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> in the body <input type="checkbox"/> totally dark void when leaving the body, or... <input type="checkbox"/> dark void filled with little sparkling lights when leaving the body, or... tunnel when leaving the body out of the body, in vicinity of "the corpse" <input type="checkbox"/> *realm of bewildered spirits *border after one leave's one's body <input type="checkbox"/> void or tunnel to the light or another world border before the light border before another world <input type="checkbox"/> another world of light and beauty meadow <input type="checkbox"/> flowers <input type="checkbox"/> *crystal or marble "palace" *city of light 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> in the body <input type="checkbox"/> dark-filled void, the mind of black near-attainment, 'Chi-kha'i Bardo <input type="checkbox"/> smoke filled with sparks, third dissolution of the 'Chi-kha'i Bardo deceased sees relatives mourning body, own funeral, <i>Srid-pa'i Bardo</i> <input type="checkbox"/> deceased sees vague, ghostly images of other dead persons in twilight, hazy <i>Srid-pa'i Bardo</i> <input type="checkbox"/> dark-filled void, the mind of black near-attainment, 'Chi-kha'i Bardo <input type="checkbox"/> pure Paradise realms, <i>Chos-nyid Bardo</i> <input type="checkbox"/> the Clear Light of the 'Chi-kha'i Bardo resembles a "dazzlement produced by an infinitely vibrant landscape in springtime (Evans-Wentz, 1960, p. lxxiii); lovely garden in <i>Srid-pa'i Bardo</i> (Lodö, 1987, p. 46) <input type="checkbox"/> heavenly palace in <i>Srid-pa'i Bardo</i> (Lodö, 1987, p. 46)
<i>Events Experienced within Places</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> hears oneself pronounced dead <input type="checkbox"/> hears a loud noise (e.g., roaring wind, buzzing, ringing) leaves body without a distinct location of exit by floating out as a consciousness or going through a tunnel views own body from the side and above greeted by spirits, guides, or religious figures greeted by deceased relatives, friends see deceased relatives, friends, who are not greeters <input type="checkbox"/> see spirits, guides, religious figures who are not greeters <input type="checkbox"/> sees brilliant, golden, white, or multicolored light, which is dualistically perceived (I-light dichotomy retained) communicates with a brilliant light <input type="checkbox"/> merging with a brilliant light <input type="checkbox"/> life review <input type="checkbox"/> events reveal that near-death is a learning process 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> deceased sees relatives mourning body <input type="checkbox"/> deceased experiences earthquakes, floods, and winds in first through fourth dissolutions of 'Chi-kha'i Bardo; sounds of 1000 thunders with the Wrathful deities in <i>Chos-nyid Bardo</i> (Lodö, 1987, p. 37); sounds of crumbling mountains, roaring fire, fierce winds, overflowing seas in <i>Srid-pa'i Bardo</i> (Evans-Wentz, 1960, p. 162) deceased's very subtle wind and mind leave body from heart through crown of head (ideal), middle of brow, ear, nose, eye, mouth, urinary passage, or anus, which determines the plane of rebirth (Evans-Wentz, 1960, p. lxix; Lodö, 1982, p. 11; Lati & Hopkins, 1985, pp. 49, 53-54) deceased sees relatives mourning body <input type="checkbox"/> many Buddhas and deities seen in <i>Chos-nyid Bardo</i>, see above <input type="checkbox"/> dualistic, white-filled void, the mind of white appearance, fifth dissolution, 'Chi-kha'i Bardo simultaneous appearance of the 6 peaceful Buddhas, then 52 Knowledge-holding deities shining forth various colored lights in a mandala, <i>Chos-nyid Bardo</i> simultaneous shining of the 58 Wrathful deities, then all Wrathful deities as Lord of Death, <i>Chos-nyid Bardo</i> <input type="checkbox"/> merging with the Clear Light or any of Peaceful, Wrathful, or Knowledge-holding deities <input type="checkbox"/> judgment by Lord of Death, two Geniuses <input type="checkbox"/> events reveal that death is a learning process

*saved from death by a supernatural rescue,
e.g., a light, voice, hand
jerked back into one's body suddenly

Cognitive, Emotional, Sensory, and Kinesthetic Characteristics

- | | |
|---|---|
| <p><input type="checkbox"/> real, versus dreamlike, quality</p> <p>the experience that cannot really be communicated in words because there are not earthly experiences like it
crisp logic without emotions involved</p> <p>thoughts speeded up</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> heightened, clear senses of vision, hearing, motion
lack of taste, smell, touch, most kinesthetic sensations
brightly illuminated or colorful environment
soon after leaving the body</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> sense of transcendent peace, calm, and well-being after leaving the body and throughout the NDE</p> <p>lack of pain</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> sense of floating in space, weightlessness</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> sense of being controlled in movement by outside forces</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> able to make own decisions and control events, e.g., to advance no farther</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> emotional detachment from earthly body and events as if all is natural, initially, in out-of-body experience</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> emotional involvement (feelings of love, bliss) later, in the presence of the Light</p> <p>mental detachment from earthly body and events;
no judgment</p> <p>lack of recognition of own earthly body, at first</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> leaves physical body as disembodied consciousness; a more subtle body resembling physical body apparently develops later (Ring, 1980, p. 228)
experience being consciousness without a body during out of body experience</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> experiences having a new body, sometimes resembling physical body</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> *desire to get back in one's body, subsequently</p> <p>no evidence of a silver cord connecting the physical and new body during out-of-body experience (Ring, 1980, p. 52)</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> ability to pass through solids</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> ability to move over great distances quickly</p> <p>no data on reflectivity of the subtle body</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> ability to read the thoughts of the living</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> inability to contact the living</p> | <p><input type="checkbox"/> deceased commonly believes the apparitions in the bardos to be exterior reality, is frightened and runs from them</p> <p>commonly is frightened, confused; scattering thoughts because intellect is now separate from the body (Evans-Wentz, 1960, p. 164)</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> all five senses heightened
all five senses present plus sense of heat (deceased feels like burning, third dissolution, <i>'Chi-kha'i Bardo</i>)</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> feels great misery and terror, indifference, or pleasure, according to karma, in <i>Srid-pa'i Bardo</i>
intense, unending pain as dismembered by Lord of Death, <i>Chos-nyid, Srid-pa'i Bardos</i>; squeezed into cracks of rocks, <i>Srid-pa'i Bardo</i></p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> blown around like a leaf, <i>Srid-pa'i Bardo</i></p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> blown around like a leaf by winds of karma, <i>Srid-pa'i Bardo</i></p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> choice in how to react toward the Clear Light and deities in <i>'Chi-kha'i, Chos-nyid Bardos</i>, choice guided by reading book of the dead to deceased; less choice for persons of poor karma in <i>Srid-pa'i Bardo</i></p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> emotional detachment initially while experiencing the swoon of the seventh and eighth dissolutions</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> emotional involvement later: commonly frightened in <i>Chos-nyid, Srid-pa'i Bardos</i>, emotionally involved in distribution of inheritance</p> <p>deceased recognizes own body, <i>Srid-pa'i Bardo</i></p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> deceased experiences the <i>'Chi-kha'i and Chos-nyid Bardos</i> as disembodied consciousness; perceives a more subtle body resembling the physical body in <i>Srid-pa'i Bardo</i>
experiences being consciousness without a body as perceives the Clear Light of <i>'Chi-kha'i Bardo</i></p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> experiences psychically-projected, subtle "desire" body resembling physical body, in <i>Chos-nyid, Srid-pa'i Bardos</i> (Evans-Wentz, 1960, pp. 30, 156)</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> deceased desires and seeks another body when sees own and weeping relatives
no mention of silver cord connecting the physical and subtle bodies</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> ability to pass through solids in subtle body, <i>Srid-pa'i Bardo</i></p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> ability to move over great distances quickly in subtle body, <i>Srid-pa'i Bardo</i>
subtle body casts no shadow and is not reflected in water (Lodö, 1987, p. 21)</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> ability to read the thoughts of the living (Lati & Hopkins, 1985, p. 10)</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> inability to contact the living, <i>Srid-pa'i Bardo</i></p> |
|---|---|

- feel lonely and isolated from the living
- *ability to feel the emotions of the living
- inability to lie during life review
- time speeded up or slowed down
- ordinal-scale time
- timelessness while with the light
- space extended or infinite
- ordinal-scale space
- loss of sense of space while with the light
- telepathic thought transference with otherworldly personages
- experiences ecstatic, overwhelming love, joy in the presence of the light
- experiences all universal knowledge, revelation in the presence of the light
- precognitive information on personal events
- precognitive information on world events
- clarification on what truly matters in one's life in the presence of the light
- multiple events of one's life are reviewed simultaneously like a hologram
- emotional detachment from reviewed events of one's life
- *emotional involvement in reviewed events of one's life
- *ability to select reviewed events of one's life
- hears heavenly music
- *smells heavenly flowers
- reluctant to return to one's body
- sometimes pulled back emotionally by loved ones on earth
- pulled back by basic desires for life, family
- regarded as abnormal by others when they tell their experience

- feel lonely and isolated from the living, *Srid-pa'i Bardo*
- inability to lie during judgment in *Srid-pa'i Bardo*
- sequences of days in the bardos correspond to sequences of thoughts
- sequences of days in the bardo correspond to sequences of thoughts
- space infinite for those who merge with the Clear Light and create *Dharma-kaya*
- sequential counting of one's good and bad deeds by geniuses during judgment
- deceased attempts to lie when judged; dismemberment by Lord of Death causes intense pain
- deceased attempts to lie when judged; dismemberment by Lord of Death causes intense pain
- commonly attracted to mother or father-to-be while in *Srid-pa'i Bardo*, leading to rebirth
- pulled back by desire for a body in the *Srid-pa'i Bardo*

¹Most characteristics are compiled from Greyson (1991), Groth-Marnat and Schumaker (1989), Moody (1975, 1977), Noyes and Slymen (1979), Ring (1980, 1984, pp. 36-38, 83). Asterisks indicate rarely occurring features of Euro-American NDEs. Squares indicate similarities between Euro-American NDEs and Tibetan DEs.

ally elaborated into world views, beliefs, and art styles, which, in turn, filter and frame the interpretation of such experiences during shamanic journeying (Lewis-Williams & Dowson, 1988; Reichel-Dolmatoff, 1987). The shamanic journey has many analogs to the death process. Similarly, Hallowell (1940) ethnographically documented that the convictions of the Canadian Berens River Sauteaux Indians about the afterlife were based largely on accounts of the nonordinary reality experiences of persons who were considered to have died and returned, whatever the primary cause of those NDEs.

This evolutionary perspective on the relationship between fundamental raw experiences and world view has three implications. First, one can expect the four explanations to account for only the most fundamental features of NDEs and DEs that are potentially shared crossculturally, not the detailed contents that may or may not be shared. Details are more likely to relate to cultural ela-

boration and selection. For example, one or more of the four explanations might better account for perceiving a natural, vibrant, otherworld landscape, generally, than the detailed content of the landscape.

Second, and following from the first, the biological, depth psychological, experiential, and nonordinary reality explanations complete rather than contradict explanations that focus on world view and enculturation. Specifically, the explanations that NDEs are culturally-constructed experiences (Zaleski, 1987) or are the product of learned expectations (DeSpelder & Strickland, 1983, p. 403) are incomplete. They do not address the origin of the content of cultural constructions in fundamental raw experiences. They also do not consider the complex feedback relationships that may exist between raw experience, world view and expectation, and perceptions filtered by world view, as world views evolve or experiences shift. For example, Ring (1985) has documented that NDEs currently are a source of personal, spiritual evolution; Peay (1991), in turn, shows how these experiences and persons are shifting Euro-American views of death.

A third implication of the evolutionary perspective is that NDEs and DEs can be expected to sometimes waiver from the learned expectations and world view of the experiencer. This is so because evolving world views and beliefs are not one-to-one descriptions of raw experience. In fact, this partial lack of correspondence is what one finds, as documented below. This supports the contention that explaining NDEs solely as culturally constructed experiences or as projections of learned expectations is an incomplete explanation.

The biological explanation. One explanation of the features that are shared among Euro-American NDEs and Tibetan DEs is pan-human neurophysiology and the biology of death. Experiencing visual fields of color and light, the dark void, bodily sensations such as weightlessness and infinite spaciousness, and hearing loud noises are examples of shared traits that more obviously might have correlates in biological processes. Hearing loud noises was thought by *Bardo thos-grol chen-mo* commentator Evans-Wentz (1960, pp. 237-43) to be a pan-human, physiologically based phenomenon associated with the dissociation of consciousness from the body rather than a spiritual-parapsychological phenomenon. In contemporary psychological studies, Grof (1985, pp. 93-95) has attributed hearing analogous loud noises at the beginning of deep altered states of consciousness to the biological correlates of a shift in awareness from exterior reality to realities of the unconscious psyche.

*pan-
human
neuro-
physiology*

A notable dissimilarity between the Tibetan and Euro-American experiences which is unexpected, given pan-human biology, is the

experience of moving through a tunnel. Cerebral anoxia is one known trigger of tunnel vision. The structure of the visual cortex has been suggested as the cause of the tunnel form (Blackmore & Troscianko, 1989). Yet the tunnel experience is not described in the Tibetan DE or published 'das-log experiences (Epstein, 1982).

The depth psychological explanation. A second possible explanation of the experiences shared in Euro-American NDEs and Tibetan DEs is the psychological projection and subsequent culturally and personally filtered perception of pan-human, archetypal content of a collective unconscious (Jung, 1960, 1971a, 1971b) upon dying and death. Possible examples of this explanation include the archetype of day/consciousness experienced as a white or gold light; the archetype of night/unconscious experienced as a dark void; the archetypes of the Wise Old Man, Great Father, or Hero clothed as culture-specific, religious characters; the archetypes of Growth and Learning experienced as a life review/judgment and as a realization of the nature of near-death or death.

The Tibetan books of the dead, themselves, offer this interpretation of the dying and death process. Entities experienced during the 'Chi-kha'i, Chos-nyid, and Srid-pa'i Bardos are said to be nothing more than the unfolding and projection of one's own essential Mind, or the dualistic content of the limited mind, as thought-forms. All of these experiences are held to have no real existence outside of and separate from oneself. They are called "illusions," "hallucinations," and "apparitions" in being projections falsely separated from oneself and in being produced by and filtered during their perception by personal and broader karmas (Evans-Wentz, 1960, pp. 31-32).

"illusions,"
"hallucinations,"
"apparitions"

The experiential explanation. A third explanation of the shared traits is pan-human worldly experience. Universal, repeated, emotionally loaded experiences in the biophysical and social world, which have been psychologically idealized over many generations and populations, were hypothesized by Jung (1971a) to be the causes of psychological archetypes. Universally shared worldly experiences would thus be part of any depth psychological explanation of crossculturally shared death or near-death perceptions as archetypes of the collective unconscious.

At the same time, pan-human worldly experience can be evoked independent of pan-human archetypes as an explanation of some features shared by Euro-American NDEs and Tibetan DEs. Near-death and death may simply bring the projection and perception of personally idealized worldly experiences that have been generalized through their repeated experience, cognitive classification, and filtering by cultural-linguistic categories and world views. Some of these experiences would be shared by all humans. For

example, the experience of night is shared by all humans and could be projected and perceived in idealized form upon death as a dark void for all persons in all societies, with personal and/or culture-specific idealization. It would not be necessary to posit an archetypal Night Void. Similarly the personally and/or culturally idealized sun and day might be projected and perceived upon death as a white or golden light.

The nonordinary reality explanation. This explanation holds that similarities occur between Euro-American NDEs and Tibetan DEs because, upon death or near death, all humans experience the same nonordinary, exterior reality, although perceived through varying personal and cultural filters. Any of the shared experiences listed above might be explained in this manner. Additionally, this explanation requires the persistence, in near-death and death, of certain common qualities of the human condition, which are evoked when interacting with nonordinary reality. Examples of these qualities are feeling lonely upon not being able to communicate with living loved ones and emotional attachment to one's body.

On the Metaphysical Nature of Death

If one assumes that a NDE is the beginning of a death process, then the observed crosscultural similarities in Table 3 may reveal some fundamental properties of death. First, consciousness at death is similar enough to consciousness during life that the experiencer has difficulty recognizing that they have shifted realities (see also Ring, 1980, pp. 82-83). This concurs with the Tibetan Buddhist belief that all of the bardos, including life, dying, between-life, rebirth, meditation, and dreaming, are fundamentally similar in their dualistic structure and in having a continuous time-space structure in appearance.

*some
fundamental
properties
of
death*

Second, the death space is like life in that it is in part an active classroom for learning. Lessons in death may vary among cultures (see below), just as they vary among cultures in life, but the heuristic quality of death remains constant.

Third, the death process, like life, involves choice, which is the basis for both learning and the creation of personal experience. This is not a conclusion one would draw from popular views of the Euro-American NDE, which unfortunately caricaturize it as a more passively and mechanically experienced process.

Fourth, one fundamental, possibly universal lesson of the death process is to accept both light and darkness from the point of view of light. Euro-Americans see both their light and dark deeds in their life review (e.g., Moody, 1975, p. 67) within the caring love of the

Light. The Tibetan books of the dead encourage the deceased to recognize both the Peaceful and Wrathful deities as aspects of themselves. The Tibetan books of the dead go further than the Euro-American NDE by encouraging the deceased not simply to accept darkness, but to psychologically integrate it and overcome the duality of light and darkness by merging with the Wrathful deities. The reward for this is the state of consciousness associated with their Peaceful counterparts.

Fifth, the initial phases of death are peaceful, in part as a result of emotional detachment (see also Ring, 1980, pp. 91-92). These phases include experiencing a dark void and the out-of-body experience for most Euro-Americans and the period of "swoon" for Tibetans. In later phases of death, the emotions reappear. For example, Euro-Americans experience overwhelming love and bliss in the presence of the Light and sometimes are "pulled back" by bonds of love to earthly loved ones. Most Tibetans experience fear in the *Chos-nyid* and *Srid-pa'i Bardos* and may be reborn through emotional attractions to visions of their future parents.

Sixth, human desires, as distinct from and causing the emotions, manifest in later phases of death. These include desires for life, a body, having a family, and other reasons for rebirth or being "pulled back."

Seventh, death is initially experienced by consciousness disembodied: the Euro-American out-of-body experience and Tibetan experience of the Clear Light. Only as death progresses is a more subtle, immaterial body perceived. The qualities and capabilities of this body are very similar in the Tibetan and Euro-American cases (Table 3), and resemble descriptions of the nature of "ghosts" in parapsychological literature (Ring, 1980, pp. 220-32) and crosscultural lore.

Differences in Content and Their Explanation

Some of the differences between Euro-American NDEs and the Tibetan DE (Table 3) provide insight into the effect of learned cultural world views and beliefs upon these experiences. The fundamental and perhaps surprising conclusion to be drawn is that not all differences in the death/near death experience that vary systematically between cultures are learned. Some systematic differences do not relate to differences in either world view or expectation. Instead, they may reflect innate differences in culture-specific levels of the collective unconscious or to differences in the nonordinary realities that are experienced.

Certain differences between Euro-American NDEs and the Tibetan DE clearly concord with and may be derived from differences

between learned Christian versus Buddhist world views and beliefs. These include: (1) the Light, Jesus, angels, and other figures of light seen by Euro-Americans compared to the Buddhas and deities experienced by Tibetans; (2) the typically golden color of the Light seen by Euro-Americans (Ring, 1980, p. 56) compared to the Clear Light seen by Tibetans; and (3) the heavenly music heard by some Euro-Americans but not by Tibetans. These differences in experiences may derive from differences in world views, which are internalized over life and then psychologically projected and perceived during the dying process.

Other differences between Euro-American NDEs and the Tibetan DE also seem, on first appearance, as though they might derive from differences between learned Christian versus Buddhist world views and beliefs but, on deeper examination, do not. As discussed above, Mahayana Tibetan Buddhism differs from contemporary Christian thought in the emphasis of its vision of the universe as ultimately Mind more so than Love. Also, it focuses on the Paths of Knowledge and Meditation over the Path of Love as the vehicles for overcoming separation and attaining Oneness. Finally, it assumes karma and judgment, rather than forgiveness, to be the dynamics of the cosmos that motivate personal spiritual growth. These distinctions in world view clearly concord with the following modal differences between Euro-American NDEs and Tibetan DEs. (1) The Light in Euro-American NDEs brings the message that love, and secondarily growing in knowledge, are the lessons of life. In contrast, Tibetan DEs emphasize growing in knowledge about the nature of the self and reality. (2) The Light is identified as love and knowledge by Euro-Americans whereas the Clear Light is the projected, natural, discarnate, quiescent Mind for Tibetan Buddhists. (3) The Light brings ecstatic love and bliss to the Euro-American, whereas the Tibetan may not recognize or be attracted to the Clear Light and may fear other deities associated with lights of various colors. (4) Euro-Americans have constructive, supportive life reviews whereas a spiritually untrained Tibetan has a judgment ending in dismemberment. (5) Euro-Americans are often greeted or guided through near-death by loving and supportive relatives or friendly spirits whereas the Tibetan is left alone in death to challenging “tests.” (6) Euro-Americans are sometimes “pulled back” to earth by bonds of love to survivors whereas the spiritually untrained Tibetan is reborn as a result of primal desires, which are “conceptions” of the mind.

*world
view
distinctions
and
modal
differences*

Closer examination shows that these six systematic crosscultural differences do not, however, derive from differences in learned world view and belief, at least for Euro-Americans. This is so because Euro-Americans vary personally and subculturally in their particular beliefs and expectations about the above features of the afterlife, yet the above features are nevertheless experienced al-

features
experienced
almost
uniformly
across
Euro-
Americans

most uniformly across Euro-Americans. Specifically, and first, many Euro-Americans still retain vestiges of the Roman Catholic belief, of the Late Middle Ages (Ariès, 1981), that death involves some kind of judgment and weighing of the soul. A recent Gallup survey (Sheler, 1991), which found that about 60% of Americans currently believe in hell, implies that a large percentage of Americans believe in some kind of assessment of the soul. Yet, to date, no Euro-American NDE has been reported in the research literature to involve a judgment or weighing. Instead, supportive life reviews in the context of love are usually experienced. Second, some Euro-Americans also retain vestiges of the Roman Catholic belief of the Late Middle Ages that death involves some kind of “battle” or “pull” between “good” and “evil” forces for the individual. This view contrasts with each of the six features enumerated above, which focus on death as an experience of love. Third, most survivors of “surcease suicide,” who expect to end all consciousness and pain through death (DeSpelder & Strickland, 1983, pp. 353-54), nonetheless have NDEs typical of the Euro-American, which may include a life review in the context of the love and compassion of the Light. Fourth, children, who have been enculturated to believe that angels will take them away at death, see unexpected spirits: “angels without wings” (DeSpelder & Strickland, 1987, p. 463; Morse, 1990, pp. 6-9, 29). The same is reported among the deathbed visions of children (Barrett, 1926). Fifth, children who have been raised in families with other than contemporary Christian beliefs nevertheless can have NDEs typical of contemporary Christians. For example, a Euro-American child brought up in the Eastern philosophies nevertheless had a NDE in which he saw God as an old man with a beard (Morse, 1990, p. 54). A Mormon child was conducted to Jesus by an angelic-like guardian spirit; such guardians are not a part of Mormon beliefs (Morse, 1990, pp. 6-7). Thus, the explanation that expectations based on Christian world view and beliefs about death are the origin of features of Euro-American NDEs that are uniform within the culture, yet differ from the Tibetan DE, is not born out for some features. Other explanations must be found.

Two alternative explanations logically arise. These minimally would explain the six systematic crosscultural differences just considered, but could also apply to the other three mentioned previously.

A depth-psychological explanation. This explanation holds that those systematic differences between Euro-American NDEs and Tibetan DEs that do not derive from differences in world view and expectation are projections of innate contents of a hypothetical level of the unconscious psyche that varies from culture to culture or culture area to culture area. Such a culture-specific, collective or group unconscious would be distinct from Jung’s (1971a, 1971b) pan-human, collective unconscious in its more limited geographic-demographic expanse and in the specificity of its imagery content.

It would contain the mythological personages and core themes of a culture or culture area that are specific expressions or “upwellings” of more general archetypes from the pan-human collective unconscious (Johnson, 1974, pp. 1-6; 1983, pp. xiii, 2-3). The Buddhas, Jesus, angels, and core cultural themes of Knowledge and Love would be examples. A similar culture-specific, collective level of the mind, which is projected outward individually as “shared illusion,” is inferred in Mahayana Buddhism (Becker, 1985, p. 15). Thus, in this explanation, births in different cultures bring minds with different innate content which, at death, are projected outward and perceived as different external “realities.”

A nonordinary or bands-of-reality explanation. An alternative explanation of the systematic differences found between Euro-American NDEs and Tibetan DEs is that members of these two cultures participate in different hypothetical *bands* of external reality that extend not only through life, but into death. Birth within different cultures would offer different paths in both life and death. A person would be born into and live in a culture that poses certain issues and alternative solutions, requires certain decisions, and thus emphasizes a certain range of lessons, providing opportunities for personal growth in certain areas. This band of reality and its lessons would extend into death. Thus, for example, Euro-Americans learning the Path of Love in life also learn it at near-death as they are greeted by loving and supportive relatives or spirits. Tibetans learning the Paths of Knowledge and Meditation in life and death are not so greeted.

*different
paths
in
both
life
and
death*

The idea that persons of different cultures participate in different bands of reality, which have different content and which constrain experience differently, is supported by several kinds of research on altered states of consciousness. Goodman (1988, 1990) found that different postures used by shamans and meditators in different cultures systematically evoke different kinds of trance experiences in motif and theme even today when the postures are taken by contemporary Euro-Americans in rattle-induced trance. For example, if one journeys in the posture of the Bear Spirit of the nineteenth-century Northwest Coast Indian shaman, this evokes the experience (Goodman, 1990, pp. 20, 100-106, 168-175) of one’s body or head being split open, and the receiving of a flow of healing energy. In contrast, journeying in the posture of the West African Bijogo evokes a death and rebirth experience. Different body postures appear to serve as doorways to different bands of reality pertinent to different cultures of different places and times. For Goodman (1988, pp. 46, 170), these realities vary systematically with the habitat and evolutionary type of the society.

The idea of distinct “bands of reality” that are culture or culture-area specific is similar to Sheldrake’s (1981, pp. 71-74) concept of

biological species which are kept distinct by different “morphogenetic fields.” In both the conceptions of cultural bands of reality and biological species, material forms, activities, and experiences in life are constrained within set ranges and set trajectories of growth and evolution.

The depth psychological and nonordinary reality explanations of the systematic differences found between Euro-American NDEs and the Tibetan DE have been presented above as though they are logical alternatives. This duality corresponds to the Western philosophical distinction between *inner* psychological reality, which may be projected and perceived, versus *outer* reality which is perceived and filtered through mental constructs. However, this distinction is unnecessary from the point of view of some philosophies. The Tibetan books of the dead teach that outer and inner reality are truly one, that outer reality is the objectification of mind—simply one’s own thought-forms (Evans-Wentz, 1960, pp. 31-32). For example, the Peaceful and Wrathful deities are at once projections of the psyche and real (Evans-Wentz, 1960, p. xxxvii). Plains Indian philosophies teach that outer reality is simply the “mirror” of the inner self (Storm, 1972, pp. 4-27). In Jungian psychology, outer reality ultimately mirrors inner psyche, and this can cause synchronicities in life. The oneness of inner and outer has also been posited as the esoteric premise behind some of Christ’s most essential teachings, such as “I am my brother’s keeper” and “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”

*differences
in
content
of
NDEs
and DEs
concord
with
differences
in
world-view*

In sum, some systematic differences in the content of Euro-American NDEs and Tibetan DEs concord with differences in the learned world-view and beliefs of these cultures. These systematic differences in experience may derive from different projected expectations about death that relate to world-view and belief. Alternatively, these different experiences may derive from differences in the nonordinary realities engaged during dying by Euro-Americans versus Tibetans, and may have served as the bases for development of the differing world-views of Euro-Americans from Tibetans. Data do not clarify which of these explanations is most appropriate.

At the same time, some of the contents of Euro-American NDEs that differ systematically from Tibetan DEs clearly do not concord with and derive from learned Euro-American beliefs about the afterlife, because these vary personally and subculturally. Experiences do not necessarily meet learned expectations. This finding may be used to suggest the existence of an innate, culture-specific collective level of the unconscious psyche, or of culture-specific bands of reality that extend through life and death, or both, which are then experienced at near-death and possibly death. Some differences between Euro-American Christian and Tibetan Buddhist world-views may have developed in relation to, but only approxi-

mating experiences deriving from, this level of the psyche or these bands, leading to some experiences that do not follow from belief or expectation, as documented in the Euro-American case.

The above dissection of Euro-American NDEs into possibly culturally learned components, and unlearned, depth-psychological or nonordinary reality components counters Zaleski's (1987, pp. 195-99) view of NDEs and how they are to be understood. Zaleski holds, first, that all aspects of NDEs are culturally constructed, in that through their telling and retelling, they are shaped by culturally learned linguistic categories and beliefs. Second, she takes NDEs to be personal "narrative wholes" or "dramas" that, being enmeshed in and expressed through cultural categories, cannot be decomposed into elements of varying origin. These two characterizations of NDEs are not empirically supported here by the discrimination of unlearned, possibly depth-psychological or nonordinary reality aspects of NDEs from their possibly culturally learned aspects. Moreover, coming to understand the various sources of the elements of NDEs does not necessarily deny their personal, social, or pan-human meaningfulness, as Zaleski (1987, p. 198) argues.

Similarities and Differences in Structure

Here, Euro-American NDEs and Tibetan DEs will be compared for two aspects of their structure: (1) specific similarities and differences in the sequencing of places and events that are perceived; (2) more general, fundamental properties of perceived places as alternate realities and the essential relationships between them.

*comparison
of
two
aspects
of
structure*

Sequencing. Table 4 compares Euro-American NDEs to Tibetan DEs for the sequencing of their places and events. Allowing for differences in content, a common general sequence is found: (1) being in the body; (2) hearing a loud noise apparently while consciousness dissociates from the body; (3) experiencing a dark void, sometimes filled with small sparkles; (4) being out of the body, in the form of disembodied consciousness or within a new, subtle body; (5a) dealing with earthly issues such as realizing one is dead, sometimes wanting to get back into one's body, and seeing/visiting the living; (5b) experiencing a "being" (i.e., the Light, the Lord of Death) that is omniscient; (5c) having a life review or judgment; (6) seeing another world; and (7) being pulled back to earth to continue life or for rebirth because of emotional attachments or desires. Experiences 5b and 5c are reversed relative to experience in the two sequences. However, even within Euro-American NDEs, experience 5b of seeing the Light, varies greatly in its sequential position.

It is significant that these similarities arise, despite the fact that a near-death process is being compared to a supposed death process.

TABLE 4

TYPICAL SEQUENCE OF PLACES AND SELECTED EVENTS EXPERIENCED IN DEEP EURO-AMERICAN NDEs COMPARED TO THE SEQUENCE IN THE TIBETAN BOOKS OF THE DEAD¹

Euro-Americans	Tibetan Books of the Dead
<input type="checkbox"/> in the body with ordinary consciousness	<input type="checkbox"/> in the body with ordinary consciousness
<input type="checkbox"/> hear a loud noise before/while leaving the body, as consciousness withdraws from bodily senses (roaring wind, buzzing, ringing)	<input type="checkbox"/> appearance of mirages, smoke, sparks in smoke, sputtering butterlamp, or four female Buddhas; feeling of falling apart from earthquakes, being flooded, burning, blown by winds
<input type="checkbox"/> dark void while leaving the body (optional) sense of transcendent peace, well-being associated with the void tunnel by which leave the body (optional)	<input type="checkbox"/> the dualistic white light (mind of white appearance) <input type="checkbox"/> a dualistic red light (mind of red increase) <input type="checkbox"/> a dark void (mind of black near-attainment) <input type="checkbox"/> nondualistic Clear Light of natural mind <input type="checkbox"/> secondary, dimmer Clear Light
<input type="checkbox"/> out of the body	<input type="checkbox"/> out of the body
<input type="checkbox"/> sees own body from a distance, experiences being simply consciousness or having a new, ethereal body with heightened senses and extraordinary powers <input type="checkbox"/> dealing with earthly issues: desire to re-enter own body by some as a first-order response realization of being dead sees the living; experiences the inability to communicate with the living; feeling alone border to further progress (optional) void or tunnel to the light and/or another world border to further progress (optional)	<input type="checkbox"/> appearance of Peaceful, Wrathful, and Knowledge-holding deities; Lord of Death in <i>Chos-nyid Bardo</i> , each bearing lights of various or multiple colors <input type="checkbox"/> judgment by the Lord of Death in <i>Chos-nyid Bardo</i> sounds of 1000 thunders with Wrathful Deities in <i>Chos-nyid Bardo</i> twilight, hazy <i>Srid-pa'i Bardo</i> <input type="checkbox"/> realization of new body with extraordinary powers and heightened senses <input type="checkbox"/> dealing with earthly issues: seeing the living mourn experiencing the inability to communicate with the living; feeling alone realization of being dead visiting old haunts, blown by winds of karma seeing threatening apparitions, hears loud noises like mountains crumbling, overflowing seas, roaring fires unpleasant body sensation of being squeezed into cracks desire and attempt to re-enter own or other's bodies
<input type="checkbox"/> seeing another world of light and beauty	<input type="checkbox"/> pure Paradise realms, <i>Chos-nyid Bardo</i>
<input type="checkbox"/> pulled back to earth by emotional attachments or desires	<input type="checkbox"/> seek rebirth because of emotional attachments or desires

¹Squares indicate the same or similar positioning of places or events in the sequence of Euro-American NDEs and Tibetan DEs.

This gives greater confidence to the assumption made above, that the *near-death experience is simply the beginning of the death process*. In turn, this supports the validity of the fundamental, metaphysical properties of death outlined above.

The similar sequencing of Euro-American NDEs and Tibetan DEs also suggests that the sequential model of dying posed by the Tibetan books of the dead may hold crossculturally. This model includes the several steps of the “forward dissolution” of the earthly body and coarser aspects of the mind followed by reaggregation into a subtle body (see above). Shared experiences 1-4 pertain to the dissolution and reaggregation processes. The shared experiences include a swoon or dark void, which Tibetan Buddhists—spiritually untrained and skilled meditators alike—are said to experience and which common Euro-Americans might also be expected to perceive. Not shared is witnessing the dawning of the nondualistic Clear Light, which only skilled Tantric meditators are said to perceive and which common Euro-Americans would thus not be expected to perceive. At the same time, reaggregation into a subtle body upon leaving the physical body is a perception that is inconsistently reported for Euro-Americans (see Moody, 1975, p. 42 versus Ring, 1980, p. 225).

Fundamental properties of alternate realities. Several more general structural similarities are found between Euro-American NDEs and Tibetan DEs. First, the boundary between consciousness during life while in a body and consciousness during dying and death while outside a body, is *directionally biased*. The dying or deceased can see and hear the living for extended periods of time, but generally not vice versa. Among Euro-Americans, survivors sensing a deceased person is quite common but the duration of the experience is usually brief (Longman et al., 1988). Among Tibetans, survivors have been reported to sense *'das-log* experiencers (Epstein, 1982), but the typical frequency and duration of such events is unclear.

*the
boundary
is
directionally
biased*

A second structural similarity between Euro-American NDEs and Tibetan DEs is that the boundary between consciousness during life while in a body and consciousness during dying and death while outside a body is *differentially permeable* to different modes of sensation. The dying or deceased can see and hear the earthly realm but not touch it in most cases. Longman et al. (1988) reports for a sample of Euro-Americans that survivors sense a deceased loved one through touch in only about 10% of all cases of some kind of sensing. Epstein (1982) cites only a couple of cases where Tibetan survivors sensed a *'das-log* experiencer by their touch.

Third, the life and after-death planes are perceived to be *positioned vertically*. Most Euro-Americans who experience moving through

a tunnel have the sense of moving upward toward the Light. Similarly, the six Tibetan Buddhist *lokas* or planes of consciousness in this world of *samsara* are said to be positioned vertically. Vertical positioning of nonordinary realities is posited almost universally in the cosmology of shamanic cultures (Eliade, 1964, pp. 259-79), which formed the foundations for the cosmologies of contemporary world religions that also posit this. In shamanic cosmologies, the shaman commonly is said to journey to the Lower Worlds through a tunnel (Harner, 1980), or to ascend to the Upper Worlds via analogous structures such as the world pillar, world tree, world ladder, cosmic mountain, cosmic rainbow, stairs, a cord, a vine, or a chain (Eliade, 1964, pp. 487-92).

Fourth, in both Euro-American NDEs and Tibetan DEs, perceptions of time and space are radically altered. Ring (1980, pp. 96-97) reports that the modal response of core Euro-American NDErs about how they experienced time and space is that these did not exist. A small percentage of respondents experienced the speeding up or slowing of time and the extension of space.

how
perception
may
change
through
the
events
of a
NDE

However, these statistics do not distinguish how perception may change through the events of a NDE. NDErs describe being out of the body and perceiving the earthly world, moving through a tunnel, and perceiving another world, as though they were operating within a three-dimensional spatial system with a horizon line, or at least a sense of the vertical. It is in the presence of and when merging with the Light that the NDEr typically speaks of losing all sense of space or feels space is infinite. Similar variation is described in the Tibetan books of the dead. The Tibetan DEr sees visual fields of color during the first through eighth dissolutions of dying and the *'Chi-kha'i Bardo*, and the presence of deities within fields of color during the *Chos-nyid Bardo*, rather than three-dimensional landscapes with a horizon line and sense of space, or personages within landscapes. However, during the *Srid-pa'i Bardo*, the DEr perceives the earthly world or another world within a three-dimensional spatial system. Thus, perceptions of space shift through Euro-American NDEs and Tibetan DEs.

In contrast to the sense of space, the sense of duration of time is transformed more pervasively in both Euro-American NDEs and Tibetan DEs. Euro-Americans frequently comment on their loss of sense of the duration of time while in the dark void, in the tunnel, out of their body, in the Light, and in the other world. The *Bardo thos-grol chen-mo* (Evans-Wentz, 1960) mentions that "days" of the bardos are not earthly days, but correspond to separate thoughts that vary in earth time.

Fifth, space can be experienced without time, but not vice versa. For example, while out of their body, Euro-Americans experience

the earthly realm and another world as three-dimensional landscapes with a horizon line, but may be unable to estimate durations of time within these realms. In the earthly realm, NDErs may experience the ability to travel anywhere in a moment's thought, as if time does not exist or is greatly compacted (Moody, 1978, pp. 46, 52). So, too, may Tibetans in the *Srid-pa'i Bardo* (Evans-Wentz, 1960, p. 159). Thus, space appears to be a more fundamental dimension of *psychological* experience than time. This property makes sense, for humans normally track time through changes observed in space. This psychological experience contrasts with Einstein's relative model of the universe, where time and the three dimensions of space are considered equally fundamental dimensions.

Sixth, in both Euro-American NDEs and Tibetan DEs, time and space as known on earth are not simply either present on a uniform, continuous scale or are entirely absent. Both can exist on an in-between, "ordinal scale" of measurement.

By "ordinal-scale time" is meant that events are experienced in a sequence or order, but each with unclear duration and an unclear duration between them. Thus, a Euro-American often can report the sequence with which events took place in many segments of a NDE, but is unable to estimate the total duration of the NDE or these events (e.g., Moody, 1975, p. 49; Ring, 1980, p. 96). Only when in the presence of or merged with the Light may the Euro-American experience a complete absence of time. A simultaneous or nearly-simultaneous life review in the presence of the Light (Moody, 1975, pp. 64-65) is an example of this absence of sequential time.

*"ordinal-scale
time"*

This characterization of some parts of Euro-American NDEs as being sequential and perceived on an ordinal scale whereas other parts are perceived as simultaneous, contrasts with Ring's characterization of NDEs as holographic. Ring (1980, pp. 235-37) posits that the entire core NDE, not simply experiences in the presence of the Light, occurs simultaneously. He also suggests (personal communication, 1993) that supposedly ordinal-scale perceptions of time may actually reflect the necessary sequencing that occurs in narrative descriptions of simultaneously experienced NDEs. Neither of these interpretations seem to accord with the varying nature of time perceived over the course of some individuals' NDEs.

Tibetan DEs also appear to have both sequential, ordinal-scale segments and simultaneous segments. The first six dissolutions during dying, the appearance of the Peaceful, Wrathful, and other deities in the *Chos-nyid Bardo*, and the many events of the *Srid-pa'i Bardo* are reported as sequential experiences. Their experience on an ordinal rather than uniform, continuous scale is clearly described: "days" of the *Chos-nyid* and *Srid-pa'i Bardos* correspond to separate thoughts that vary in earth time. In contrast, the

period of swoon, during the perception of the dark void and sometimes the Clear Light, is described as a timeless, thoughtless state from which the person “awakes” (Evans-Wentz, 1960, p. 29).

The changing nature of time through Tibetan DEs is supported by other descriptions of it (Lati & Hopkins, 1985, pp. 69-73) which liken the death process and Tantric meditation to each other. Tantric meditation begins with sequential mental imaging. Only in its culmination, when the Clear Light of the natural, quiescent mind is revealed, is there experience without sequences of thought and, thus, without a sense of time.

Finally, support for the existence of ordinal-scale time more generally is found in the lore of Australian Aborigines and perhaps the experiences of clairvoyants. The Aborigines speak of two kinds of time: the passing time of daily life and the “Great Time” of the Dreamtime, the time of Creation. Events in the Great Time have sequence but cannot be dated (Brennan, 1988, p. 23). In a possibly similar manner, clairvoyants have been found to experience two kinds of time: ordinary linear time and a time in which events are witnessed in a sequence but from a point of view of being and experiencing the sequential flow (LeShan, 1966).

“ordinal-
scale
space”

By “ordinal-scale space” is meant that places are experienced in a directional sequence, but each with an unclear expanse and an unclear distance between them. In both Euro-American NDEs and Tibetan DEs, ordinal-scale space is experienced when the dying or deceased travel almost instantaneously to wherever their thoughts are directed. Direction is sensed, but the distance travelled is unclear. Euro-Americans may experience this when having an out-of-body experience (e.g., Moody, 1978, pp. 46, 52). The *Bardo thos-grol chen-mo* describes this as one of the capabilities of the desire body in the *Srid-pa'i Bardo* (Evans-Wentz, 1960, p. 159).

The experiences of ordinal-scale time and ordinal-scale space are not limited to the near death or death processes. Transformation of uniform, continuous-scale time or space into ordinal-scale time or space is an ability attributed to some shamanic practitioners. Time may be “expanded” or space may be “squeezed” or “folded” with great mental concentration so that the shaman can physically traverse space more quickly than would be possible under ordinary conditions. The famous Apache shaman, Geronimo, is reported to have lengthened nights in order to allow himself and his band to travel greater distances and escape from the pursuing U.S. military (Debo, 1976, p. 145). The now deceased San Carlos Apache medicine man of Peridot, Arizona, Philip Cassadore, reported to ethnographer Dr. Elizabeth Brandt that Geronimo also folded space to escape (Brandt, personal communication, 1993). An anonymous

ethnographer of high professional credentials also reported to me the details of experiencing space folding on several occasions with a contemporary Apache shaman.

Thus, time and space are not experiences that simply exist, as ordinarily experienced, or otherwise do not exist. “In-between” experiences of time and space are possible. These range from (1) the uniform, continuous-scale time and space of ordinary reality to (2) expanded or contracted continuous-scale time and space to (3) ordinal-scale space and time with directions and sequences but unclear distances or durations to (4) simultaneous, apparently holographic existence without time or space.

In sum, comparing the structure of Euro-American NDEs and Tibetan DEs reveals some fundamental, perhaps crossculturally uniform properties of the dying and death process. These include the several steps of the “forward dissolution” of the earthly body and coarser aspects of the mind followed by reaggregation into a subtle body, the directionally biased and differentially permeable nature of the boundary between consciousness inside and outside of the body in regard to the senses, the perceived vertical positioning of nonordinary realities experienced during death, and the changing nature of space and time through the death process. Many of the properties described above concord with the experiences of mystics and meditators (Ring, 1980, pp. 218-52) as well as traditional shamans—the first mappers of the death space. These properties are readily accepted in the Tibetan Buddhist world view, where the bardos of life, death, and meditation each come to be seen as having the same essential qualities as one’s consciousness expands.

*fundamental,
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crossculturally
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of the
dying and
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CONCLUSION

This article has explored variations in near-death and death experiences, both to reveal their multiple causes and to suggest some of the general contents, properties, and meanings of the death space.

The Euro-American NDE is a composite phenomenon that is not fully explainable by any one cause. Multiple factors may affect the content and/or structure of a Euro-American NDE, and possibly death in general. These belong to multiple phenomenological levels and include: personal circumstances surrounding death or near death; one’s personal life-history and system of meaningful symbols; age and gender; culture and subculture-specific learned beliefs and symbols that are projected and/or filter perceptions; culture or culture-area specific projections or bands of reality that are not learned; and pan-human levels of consciousness, worldly experiences, and/or aspects of nonordinary reality.

Learned beliefs about death concord with and probably determine some of the content of Euro-American NDEs, as well as Tibetan DEs. However, some systematic differences between death-related experiences in these two cultures are clearly not the product of enculturation. Two possible causes of these experiences include the projection of a culture-specific, collective level of the unconscious psyche at near-death and death, and/or participation in culture-specific "bands" of external reality that extend through life and death. Moreover, the causal relationship between belief systems and death-related experiences is one of feedback and evolution: ideation originates in, yet also modifies, the perception of basic experiences at near-death and death, be those basic experiences biological, depth psychological, worldly experiential, and/or non-ordinary reality in origin. NDEs and DEs cannot adequately be understood as solely "cultural constructs" or "wholes" that are not reducible to elements of varying origin (Zaleski, 1987).

It appears that Euro-American NDEs and Tibetan DEs share certain general kinds of places (e.g., a dark void, naturalistic other world) and events (e.g., perceiving a nondualistic Light, having a life review/judgment), as well as cognitive, emotional, and sensory characteristics (e.g., quickness and clarity of thought, transcendent peace, heightened senses). Time, space, and the capabilities of the subtle body and consciousness are also altered in similar ways in Euro-American and Tibetan experiences.

*it
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that
the
death
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is
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like
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life
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Most basically, it appears that the death space, at least for Euro-Americans and Tibetans, is much like life in its essential purposes, functioning, and meanings. It would appear that the death space is a reality for learning, based on choice, and offering opportunity for growth. Although specific lessons may vary personally and culturally, there may remain in death more essential human adventures: to accept darkness with light from the point of view of light and to integrate both, and to deepen both our capacity to love and our understanding of reality and the self. Significantly, acceptance, integration of opposites, love, and knowledge-based understanding are among the most fundamental prerequisites for healing, for making whole again (Levine, 1987). Death, like life, may bring an opportunity for the learning, growing, and healing for which, it may be said, we all take birth.

NOTES

¹Shaman in traditional cultures commonly journeyed to the Lower World(s) by initially following a root, animal burrow, or crack in the earth downward, or by diving into a body of water or a hole called the "jaws of the earth" or a "smoke hole," each of which might become a tunnel. Sometimes shaman traveled through the tunnel with a "rush" or by "flying," as in Euro-American NDEs, and emerge in a Lower World landscape (Eliade, 1964, pp. 202, 204; Harner, 1980, pp. 32-37).

The dark tunnel is also thought to be the interior of the body in the views of traditional shamanism, contemporary alternative healing, and some contemporary Christian philosophy. A shaman might journey into the dark-tunnel interior of a patient's body to find and diagnose an illness (Harner, 1980, p. 152). The Sioux and other American Indians envisioned the body as a "tube" through which Great Spirit could be channeled (Mails, 1978, p. 100; 1991). The alternative healer, Brennan (1988, p. 68), holds the tunnel experience in NDEs to be the soul going up the body along the primary energy axis of the spine and leaving the body in the bright light of the crown chakra. The channelled Christian "philosopher," Emmanuel (Rodegast & Stanton, 1989, p. 137), says the tunnel experience is the transition of the soul from inside to outside the body when the soul has remained "in the body longer than is necessary after the body begins to die." It is said to be optional; a more timely and direct release circumvents the tunnel experience.

²The variations that are found among Euro-American NDEs in the sequential positions in which events occur suggests that Ring's (1980, p. 32) weighted score coefficient for scaling the depth of a NDE may not be a consistent measure. The coefficient uses the occurrence of both events and places to measure the progress that a person made through a NDE, whereas the occurrence of only places may be a more appropriate framework for assessing progress.

³Tradition holds that one book of the dead, the *Bardo thos-grol chen-mo* was composed in the eighth century A.D. by Padma-Sambhava (Guru Rinpoche). Padma-Sambhava was a Tantric yogi who introduced Vajrayana Buddhism to native Tibetans who practiced other (perhaps Bon) beliefs; he supervised the building of the first Buddhist monastery there. As the originator of the rNying-ma-pa tradition, Padma-Sambhava supposedly hid his various texts, including the book of the dead, to be revealed at a more appropriate time. According to tradition, Karma-Glingpa then discovered some of Padma-Sambhava's texts, including the *Bardo thos-grol chen-mo*, in 1326.

⁴The flow of light from a Buddha's heart to the heart of the deceased symbolizes the compassionate nature of enlightenment. This compassion arises from the realization that all sentient beings suffer.

⁵For example, in one New Age Christian philosophy, "love is the deepest reality" and one's "true nature." The universe is "friendly" and filled with "joy" rather than suffering (Rodegast & Stanton, 1987, pp. 15, 144, 202).

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