

# Death at the Crossroad: From Modern to Postmortem Consciousness

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*Modernity has generated a disenchanted attitude toward death but it has also produced conditions that force us to confront the meaning of death. Although troubled by the fear of death, we want to know whether the self ends with death and what comes after death. New sources of knowledge stemming from death and near-death research are changing our perceptions of dying and the survival of consciousness. Techniques of dying are being taught to mitigate our fear of death. We stand at a crossroad to seek out a new understanding of death and ipso facto of life itself.*

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“The time will come when life is no longer joyful for me, when living ends and dying begins. A sleepy man needs to sleep. A dying man needs to die. There’ll come a time when it is wrong and useless to resist.” My father wrote those words just before he died at the age of eighty. What went through his mind in the weeks or months preceding his death? I can only guess that he sensed his time was drawing near. Death is a private matter. Each of us has to face death in our own unique way. Our rendezvous with death is inevitable, only we do not know its precise moment. Because of this uncertainty we end up fearing death, treating it as an unpleasant event that obliterates our hopes and future. Consequently, any talk of death is deemed unhealthy and impolite. Yet, our destiny to die provides the ideal condition to examine the meaning of consciousness at life’s end.

The time has come for us to dissect death without prejudice. Death is coming out of the closet to redefine our assumptions of life. We are

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becoming more aware of the intricacies of dying and the continuity of consciousness after death. We witness this theme of postmortem consciousness in academic publications, New Age books, and popular films. Indeed, New Age and popular culture provide a good indicator of the changing attitudes toward the meaning of death. Together with the increasing awareness of the near-death experience, the public reception of postmortem consciousness is pushing us toward a new understanding of death as an expansion of consciousness rather than its termination. The aim of this article is to explore the meaning of postmortem consciousness and its implication for the question of the afterlife.

### FROM DEATH INSTINCT TO DEATH CONSCIOUSNESS

In 1919, Sigmund Freud introduced the idea of the death instinct in his work, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (Freud 1975). Freud theorized that if all instincts reverted to an earlier state, then the ultimate aim of life was death. His idea on the death instinct was treated as an impulse in opposition to and constantly in struggle with the life instinct. Freud wrote many decades before death was addressed as a problem in the transformation of consciousness. Even then, he was struggling to establish psychoanalysis as a respectable scientific enterprise. Adding the death instinct to his repertoire of psychoanalytic concepts was thus startling, to say the least. Ernest Jones (1961), his biographer, reported that psychoanalysts had mixed reactions to Freud's new ideas on death.

To juxtapose a death instinct against a life instinct was one of Freud's contributions to our understanding of human existence. But it was delimited by psychoanalytic concerns that could not accommodate ideas of the afterlife or postmortem consciousness. These ideas were not unknown at that time, but they were primarily associated with spiritualism and other fields of inquiry that lacked scientific status. Freud did not want to say that there was something spiritual about the death instinct. Doing so would have undermined his effort to establish psychoanalysis as a proper method for dealing with problems of the human psyche. Moreover, Freud and many of his followers did not relate psychoanalytic ideas to the spiritual traditions of other cultures for fear of ridicule. The exception was Carl Jung, the Swiss psychoanalyst, who broke away from Freud to formulate his own ideas that connected with those traditions.

In his memoir *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, Jung (1978) described his premonitions of other people's deaths. He seemed to possess the uncanny ability to foresee the impending deaths of people he knew without attempting to straitjacket his unique experiences in psychoanalytic terms. Instead, he tried to address the meaning of death as an instance of

consciousness transformation. The following quotations from Jung (1978) illustrate his understanding of death as a continuity rather than termination of consciousness:

If there were to be a conscious existence after death, it would, so it seems to me, have to continue on the level of consciousness attained by humanity, which in any age has an upper though variable limit. . . .

It seems probable to me that in the hereafter, too, there exist certain limitations, but that the souls of the dead only gradually find out where the limits of the liberated state lie. Somewhere "out there," there must be a determinant . . . which seeks to put an end to the after-death state. This creative determinant . . . must decide what souls will plunge again into birth. Certain souls, I imagine, feel the state of three-dimensional existence to be more blissful than that of Eternity. . . .

It is possible that any further spell of three-dimensional life would have no more meaning once the soul had reached a certain stage of understanding; it would then no longer have to return. . . . Then the soul would vanish from the three-dimensional world and attain what the Buddhists call nirvana. But if a karma still remains to be disposed of, then the soul relapses again into desires and returns to life once more. (pp. 340, 353)

Jung found it necessary to fall back on Buddhist teachings to gain a better understanding of the afterlife. In that sense, he went beyond psychoanalysis to frame the death instinct against the Buddhist concepts of karma and nirvana. At the same time, he perceived death and the afterlife as indubitably bound to the unconscious, the territory of the unknown in the inner world and the source of intuitive ideas (Jung 1978, 337-38). In his memoir, Jung did not say how the unconscious was related to karma and nirvana. Are karma and nirvana parts of our unconscious? Can we say that karma and nirvana become predominant ideas when we encounter in death the full force of the unconscious? Jung did not confront these questions, but it can be surmised that his view of the limitlessness of the unconscious has made possible speculations on the relevance of the unconscious in the death process.

Taking these cues from Jung, we can explore the meaning of death not merely as something juxtaposed to life but as a level of movement in human consciousness toward the unconscious. As a vast store of human potentiality, the unconscious provides the basis from which the death instinct can be fruitfully conceptualized as an impulse for tapping into a hidden reservoir of knowledge and experience. Thus, dying is not fading away but a natural reclamation of what was there before the development of embodied consciousness. Since Jung theorized that human consciousness was never completely cut off from the unconscious, we can assume by implication that in death our connection to the unconscious becomes even stronger. By shedding the physical body in death, our instincts are likely to become more sensitive to the hidden

dimensions of the inner world. The power of the unconscious envelops our being in the postmortem state because there is no more embodied consciousness to hold it at bay. The unconscious takes over in that state to reshape our consciousness and to direct its movement. What we understand as our consciousness before death can no longer be taken as the primary condition of reality. The predominance of the unconscious after death does not suggest that the dead sink into oblivion. Instead, we can picture reality in the context of the unconscious as a reconfiguration of our desires, emotions, and perceptions without the support of a physical body. Most people, however, are unprepared to face the unconscious in this way because they cannot imagine death as a vital link to the unconscious. The failure to realize this has been the failure of modernity.

### THE PARADOX OF MODERNITY

The fundamental thrust of modernity is to uphold the value of living, to renew and empower our faith in the progress of the physical realm. The history of modernity has produced a record of unimpeded drive toward world mastery. Modernization is the process of mastering the outer world to tame nature and elevate means over ends. Such is the achievement of contemporary technology. Humankind has now found it impossible not to modernize. Almost every nation in the world, if it has not modernized, is compelled to modernize to not be left behind. This race to modernize is a race to universalize critical rationalism as the cornerstone for launching all forms of worldly progress.

Yet, as Jung (1978, 330) has observed, rationalism has impoverished our understanding of the inner world. Rationalism has belittled the idea of the unconscious and the afterlife. Modernizing societies tend to produce experiences of disenchantment. Individuals in these societies feel the need to be weaned from mythic conceptions of the spiritual realm, including the idea of life after death. In societies that are locked in a struggle between modernity and tradition, individuals waver between the worship of critical rationalism and their gods. Death and the unconscious have been mystified by the rational instrumentality of the modern world. The power of critical rationalism has isolated death and the unconscious from our daily routines. We go about our daily lives not contemplating the next moment to be our last because it is considered irrational to think and act as though we might perish without warning. Modern ideology teaches us to celebrate life and living, and so we repress the thought of death as an inevitable event. Consequently, death becomes a silent stalker to be feared and frowned on.

The modern accomplishment in saving and prolonging lives through innovative medical technology has not brought us to the brink of immortality, but it has certainly raised expectations of delaying death. We keep

death at arm's length with our technological ingenuity, thus generating the illusion that death can be kept in check by machines, which can keep the heart beating and the blood flowing. At the present moment, cryogenics may look like science fiction: dead bodies are kept frozen to be revived at a later date. But faith in scientific technology makes many people believe that death is only a bad dream, which is reversible in the near future.

In other words, modernity has increased rather than decreased our fear of death by inculcating confidence in a make-believe world of technological salvation. The more rapidly we acquire technological knowledge for self-preservation, the greater our fear of dying because we have come to place enduring trust in a mechanized way of life antithetical to death. This trust motivates us to perceive death as the annihilator of hope and knowledge, the scourge of humankind that obstructs progress and destroys purpose. Modern scientists exert so much effort in uncovering the origins of life that they find no value in probing the process of dying. They contribute to the modern ideology that sacralizes life as the pursuit of world mastery, the inexorable belief in the empowerment of being-in-the world. The question of leaving the world is left unresolved.

If modernity promotes being-in-the-world as a reification of the self and a consolidation of self-identity, it also provides a special occasion for disputing the meaning of self-identity. This has occurred largely because our critical reasoning acts as a mirror for reflecting on and questioning the achievements made by the modern self. We ponder on the vast technological arsenal for saving and destroying lives, and how it cannot but cause great unease for the meaning of self-development. If modern knowledge unshackles us from the chains of tradition and thereby contributes to the growth of self-assurance, it is also a source of anxiety that predisposes us to doubt the integrity of the self. The accumulation of knowledge in modernity leaves us with more questions than answers. Mastering the world puts us in the predicament of being less than able to confront the moral consequences of our actions. Gaining knowledge is not necessarily a prerequisite for constructing a better and just world. The self cannot know for sure if its knowledge and understanding of the world is a guarantee for producing an identity that is more than a prosaic reflection of human contradictions (Giddens 1991; Gergen 1991).

Modernity distances us from the unconscious because the emphasis on world mastery makes us feel uncomfortable with the idea that there is something else in our lives we cannot control. Yet, doubts about ourselves narrow our distance from the unconscious. Modern reflexivity is a special condition that pits the self against its own identity, turning doubt into a lever for opening the lid that holds back the unconscious. It is the modern self that fears death and, at the same time, is fascinated by it. This fascination with death brings us closer to the unconscious. Fear is

the key that unlocks the urge to peer into the other side of conscious life. We want to know what awaits us on the other side, and so we once again attempt to probe the mysteries of the unconscious.

The paradox of modernity lies in the transformation of world mastery into the ennui of progress. There comes a stage when modernity can no longer command a sense of ultimacy or elicit an air of confidence in world construction. Modernity becomes its own deadly enemy because it fails to provide satisfactory answers to its own unfolding. The angst of the modern self reflects the tedium of world mastery and the inability to rise above the exactitude of empirical and technological control. If technology is not a panacea or a guarantor of immortality, then the self seeks death as a possible source of knowledge beyond the confines of the physical world.

Postmodernism is an inexact term for describing the inadequacies of modernity and the attempt to overcome the contradictions of world mastery by ironic means (Lyotard 1985; Harvey 1989). It is also a catchword for the failure of the self to imagine its integrity and absoluteness. The postmodern awakening of the self can be construed as a type of radicalized romanticism for confronting and dislodging the norms of world construction. The self now sees deconstruction as a way of understanding its own fabrication and the precariousness of a reality strung together by an unspoken consensus. As soon as this reality is spoken of, in terms of what it is not, the self comes to realize the imaginary nature of its being and prearranged connections to other selves. Postmodern realization cuts through the meaning of social life as an arbitrary concatenation of speech, events, assumptions, rules, and putative actions.

Self-identity becomes fractalized in postmodernity (Baudrillard 1993). The postmodern self does not seek to establish a foundational identity based on role consistency and the integration of commonsensical experiences. On the contrary, it celebrates the experience of pastiche. Fractalization is a type of pastiche that deliberately weaves together a pattern of disparate roles, resulting in a multidimensional identity without a center or an essence for immediate reference. The fractalized self is not a lost self, but one that has cut through the illusion of self-integration. Components of the self are no longer perceived as necessarily fitting into a coherent whole. Rather, the self is imagined to be an arbitrary construction of disparate parts, which may or may not hold together according to the circumstances. In other words, postmodernity offers possible release from the normative view that the self is inherently real.

In the postmodern view, death is not the same as self-obliteration. The physical body perishes, but without a foundational identity premised on physicality, the fractalized self has no concrete center from which death is adduced to be the termination of being. In the physical world, bodies die with the ceasing of vital functions. Arguably, this has no

direct correspondence with the fractalized consciousness of postmodern selves because there is no compulsion to address each dead body as signaling the end of a whole identity. In postmodern thinking, whole identities are illusory and, therefore, allusion to their demise exemplifies a case of oversubscribed concreteness. It is the lack of whole identities in postmodernity that makes death surreal. Death is no longer construed as the privileged executioner of distinct selves, since such selves are fictionally contrived from a position of absolute wholeness. Instead, death is treated as an experience of transformation that rearranges all assumptions of being. In that sense, taking stock of our multidimensional selves as we leave our physical bodies can be indeed a surreal experience.

The postmodern approach to death does not necessarily suggest the self as an immortal entity. Rather, its deconstruction of the self provides a statement against the fixed nature of self-identity. When identities are not seen or experienced as rooted in perpetuity, the notion of death as the annihilator of bodies clinging to a single identity will become otiose. The fractalized self in postmodernity does not perish in the same way that we imagine the death of concrete selves. Without a core or center from which the self is unconditionally erased by death, fractalized identities merely undergo a process of transformation since they lack an ontology susceptible to unilateral destruction. The deconstruction, rather than the destruction, of the postmodern self suggests a precarious state of being that hinges on the question of impermanence. Impermanence refers to limitless change, implying that there is only movement of consciousness but not its termination. What, then, is the meaning of impermanence for the self?

### THE SELF AND IMPERMANENCE

The Buddhist teaching on death and impermanence is generally meant as a didactic soteriology for the alleviation of suffering in the world. It is a reminder that all matter in the world is transitory and has no long-term value. Thus, attachment to matter can only generate anxiety and increase the fear of dying. As all matter eventually break down and disintegrate, it is only logical to treat all worldly concerns as possessing momentary significance that fades over time. The alleviation of suffering lies in the realization that nothing is the same forever, not even the state of dying.

Since existence is dynamic motion, all actions in the world are short-lived in the sense that the possibility of what happens in one moment depends on the demise of something else in the preceding moment. The unfolding of the world is nothing more than the fading and arising of moments (see Kalupahana 1976). Impermanence underlies all forms of existence.

The question of impermanence complements the postmodern method of deconstruction. What is constructed in the world is the mere arrangement of matter and its components at any given moment. Since time, as conceived and experienced in the physical realm, is not stagnant, moments differ to cause the breakdown and rearrangement of all compounded things in the world. It would seem that at the micro level beyond the range of normal vision, the deterioration, demise, and revitalization of matter occur rapidly without our awareness. At this level, every moment is marked by death. Body cells perish and are replaced by new ones without our immediate awareness of this process occurring at any given moment. Yet, we do not construe this process as an experience of fragmented death at the micro level. Instead, we tend to assign importance to the regeneration of matter as an indication of the continuity of life.

At the macro level, where our vision is immediate and concrete, the sense of impermanence becomes more stretched out. The experience of social and physical changes can be gauged by historical review. We can examine records, photographs, documents, memories, and so on, to evaluate the differences between then and now. Again, like the micro level, we tend to see these differences or changes as an indication of the continuity of life rather than the death of events.

Deconstruction reveals the meaning of life as an arbitrary focus on the eruption of activity, the recombination of matter, or the recharging of energy. Death is bypassed as an interstice between these moments. Its significance is treated as a rude interruption to the renewal of activities and events. The break between activation of being makes death seem like an unwieldy hollowness that depresses life. Yet, death itself is a moment that bridges other moments. We assign the label, death, to the hiatus between two moments of action to perceive the possibility of renewed activity. By deconstructing the entire chain of moments, we come to see the hiatus of death as a specific point of transition that Tibetan Buddhists refer to as *bardo*.

If death is conceived as a moment in crossing to other moments, it is arguable that the fractalized identities experienced in postmodernity resemble many moments of crossing over without our noticing the hiatus inherent in these transitions. Each shift in identity or recombination of identity entails a brief suspension of being that can be likened to dying. In other words, fractalized identities are identities of multiple deaths. Although such deaths can be regarded as metaphorical, the transitory experiences provide a means for understanding the plausibility of identity in the postphysical state. When physical bodies perish, the idea of a postphysical state suggests that the consciousness of identity may not necessarily be extinguished but undergoes transformations not dissimilar to those of postmodern selves.

It is important, then, to recognize postmodernity as accentuating the notion of impermanence. The emphasis on space of flows in postmodernity unveils a seemingly limitless transformation of experiences that overcomes the apparentness of stability. What we imagine as a fixed or stable core of characteristics in ourselves becomes a kaleidoscope of fluctuating patterns that can only be treated in a relative way. This does not imply that we lack a meaningful and practical identity. We can say that such an identity exists in so far as there is consensus on the coherence of self-definitions. In postmodernity, this consensus is challenged as untenable because the increasingly decentered and multidimensional ways of life make it difficult for any one person to disclaim his or her choice of identities. Indeed, we could cling to a procrustean identity, but it would have to coexist with other identities that prevail. In that sense, identities cannot always remain at ease with each other since we are no longer constrained by the idea that credibility is necessarily determined by consistency of actions.

If impermanence is no stranger to postmodern selves, it could mean that we gain an entirely different perspective on the experience of dying. It would likely be an experience of rapid identity transformation unencumbered by the sense of attachment to a central identity connected to a physical self. Postmodern sensibility does not dismiss our rootedness in the physical but raises awareness of the way we privilege the symbols of the physical. Hence, when the physical is nullified by death, postmodern awareness provides a vehicle for transcending those symbols in order that we ease ourselves into a new state of fluidity. In that sense, the development of postmodern attitudes toward identity transformation sets the stage for a new understanding of the death process.

Postmodernity is undoubtedly an important condition for the emergence of postmortem consciousness. Once we understand the postmodern perspective on the impermanence of selfhood, we can locate postmortem consciousness as a deep expectancy for the instability of existence. This is what we fear most: that we cannot cling on to anything good or bad. But this is not the same as nihilism. It is a challenge to our sense of being as creatures seeking "ontological security" (Giddens 1991). The emergence of postmortem consciousness suggests an effort to renounce ontological security.

### THE DEMYSTIFICATION OF DEATH

Ontological security is a concept arising from the fear of nothingness. Generally, we cannot accept that nothing truly exists in the world and that our selves are merely a figment of our imagination. Most people either dismiss or consider ludicrous the idea that the self is empty since everything that we have lived for is a result of our belief in an integrated

self. Once this belief is threatened, especially as we approach the hour of death, we begin to fear the unraveling of the self and the possibility that all our experiences are indubitably hollow. Striving to attain ontological security thus exemplifies a conscious act of self-preservation to contain this fear. But the more we seek ontological security, the greater the likelihood that we will increase our fear of death because there is nothing more frightening than the loss of this security upon the physical disintegration of the self.

Death becomes even more mysterious as we hone our skills in mastering the world to advance all the trappings of ontological security. Modernization has given us the reason to pursue the goals of world mastery as though they can guarantee self-preservation and its ramifications for meaningful existence. Instead, death has become more distant and feared as the self erects more defenses to reify its quest to construct a world of technological perfection. As technology comes to dominate our lives, we accelerate the process of self-enhancement by building an intricate system of high-tech communication to strengthen our individual identities. Each person comes to believe that high-tech communication can consolidate self-meanings at a faster pace and increase self-worth through new sources of knowledge. Death can be kept at bay because we construe technology as a panacea for our wounded selves and as an instrument of existential progress. Yet, technology cannot stop death. It has merely provided a temporary respite in our evasion of death.

In this ultramodern world, death has become more mysterious, more misunderstood, and more feared. As each of us faces the moment of death, we struggle to understand the experience and meaning of dying. Is death the end of identity and being? Is the loss of the physical body equivalent to a loss of self-meaning? Is there nothing after death? Ironically, death in modernity has increased awareness of our inadequacies in dealing with these questions. Scientific and technological mastery of the world belittled ancient and traditional knowledge of death, pointing modern man in the direction of the external dimensions and mystifying the lay of the land beyond this life. Even as we procrastinate over these questions, we feel the need to confront them to overcome the sense of dread associated with self-termination. Grappling with these questions suggests that we suspend our doubts about the possibility of a post-physical state of being. These doubts, implanted in us by the modern focus on present living realities, have contributed to our reluctance to confront the meaning of death.

In recent years, the growing literature on near-death experiences (NDEs) has provided a vital perspective on the possibility of life after death (Ring 1985; Ring and Valarino 2000). Unless one has personally experienced a NDE, doubts about the continuity of consciousness in the postmortem state cannot be irrevocably suspended. Yet at the collective

level, the authenticity of NDEs reported by a large number of people cannot simply be dismissed as a grand hoax to raise the spiritual hopes of a naive readership. What then can we make of the NDE phenomenon? In a typical NDE, a person dies but discovers that his consciousness and senses are still functioning. In fact, his consciousness and senses become enhanced once he is no longer in the physical body. The dead person, however, finds it impossible to communicate with the living. But he is able to perceive and communicate with other beings such as relatives and friends who have passed on and those thought to be spiritual guides. He comes into contact with an all-embracing light that exudes compassion, understanding, and serenity, a presence whose profundity is often received as the mind of God. These experiences are so compelling that the dead person wants to hang on to them and refuses to return to physical life even though he is told it is not his time yet to leave his body permanently. Eventually, he finds himself back in his body and in familiar surroundings. Unable to forget these experiences, he struggles to rationalize them and to disclose them to people whom he thinks might be sympathetic to his recent predicament. Many, however, remain tight-lipped for fear of ridicule.

The lives of people who experience NDEs are changed forever. It is as though they become new persons, transformed by an extraordinary event that makes them rethink their identities and future. Death is no longer feared. They seem to understand that death is merely a change of scenery, a transition to another life that reveals new opportunities and possibilities. The private nature of NDEs suggests that such transformations are limited to the individual's own consciousness and do not comprise attempts to proselytize other people. Although a person may interpret his NDE within a religious framework, there is no overwhelming evidence to suggest that personal transformations effected by NDEs are directly related to actions aimed at religious proselytization and conversion. On the contrary, it is interesting to note that secular professionals such as doctors, psychologists, and sociologists are the people responsible for bringing the NDE phenomenon to the public's attention.

The role of the secular professional in defining and publicizing the NDE phenomenon can be analyzed as an effort to shift the meaning of death away from the religious field. This field has traditionally set the parameters for all concerns associated with the problems of dying and the meaning of the afterlife. All institutional religions and their functionaries have filled an important niche in bridging human life and the hereafter. Traditional priests, prophets, and preceptors were always regarded as knowledgeable in the ways of death and the domains beyond death. Death rituals and doctrines of the afterlife came under their control, making it almost impossible for any dying person and his family to ignore or refuse their services. In other words, religious

expertise in the death process held a certain aura of hope and salvation for the layperson. It mystified the meaning of death because knowledge of dying and the hereafter were entrusted to special individuals with specific training not available to the average person. Everyone faced death but only the priests and religious experts could see them through the dying process. It was their preserve of knowing death that mystified the general comprehension of death.

The so-called discovery of the near-death phenomenon has set the wheels of demystification in motion. First, the availability of the NDE literature to the lay public makes it possible for any person with an open mind to rethink the meaning of death without the explicit intervention of the clergy. We can now conceptualize the death experience as a pattern of specific events determined by the disengagement of consciousness from the physical body. Since the near-death experience is the closest we get to understanding the moment of death, it can be treated as a plausible description of what happens when death occurs. Collectively, the descriptions of NDEs reported in recent publications set an important precedent for unveiling the death process without raising any sense of mystery or epistemological distance as generally found in the religious management of death rituals. Therefore, NDEs set a new understanding of the death process within a perspective that does not demand clerical or priestly mediation.

Second, NDEs suggest the continuity of consciousness after death. They share with other types of transcendental states certain characteristics of mind expansion that have been studied by social scientists and psychologists (Tart 1972). In other words, there is nothing special or unusual about NDEs that have not been investigated by researchers on disembodied consciousness. States of consciousness that allegedly transcend space and time, such as those experienced by shamans and psychically gifted individuals, address the question of consciousness transformation beyond physical boundaries. Similarly, NDEs present opportunities for the exploration of postmortem consciousness in circumstances not too different from the conditions producing shamanic travels, out-of-body experiences, lucid dreaming, and so forth. The mystery of NDEs fades in the light of their convergence with other paranormal phenomena that have already been systematically studied.

Third, the method of researching NDEs and related phenomena such as deathbed visions has also contributed to the demystification of the dying process (Osis and Haraldsson 1977). By quantifying survey data and subjecting them to rigorous statistical analyses, NDEs and deathbed visions are treated like any other social or psychological phenomena that can be scientifically studied. Cognitive maps of dying deduced from these statistical analyses suggest perceptual aspects of postmortem consciousness rather than melodramatic accounts of mystical transcendence.

The systematic study of NDEs and related phenomena has not only provided us with new perspectives on dying but also reduced the mystery surrounding the death experience. We are now in a better position to review the nature of consciousness in dying and the meaning of the self in death (Lee 2003). The quest for ontological security thus comes to be realized as an illusory exercise in self-affirmation, since dying is suggested by NDEs as a transformative experience that shatters our conventional understanding of self-identity. The continuity of consciousness after death suggests new modes of thinking about self-identities that will supersede the need for ontological security. NDEs provide a source of inspiration for us to reconsider the self as a reflection of the many dimensions of consciousness and not as an unchanging identity that requires unrequited solace. The question of who we are in death is no longer shrouded in mystery but presents a fresh challenge to our long held assumption that death effaces our hard earned self-identities.

### TECHNIQUES OF DYING

If the NDE is taken as a plausible model of postmortem consciousness, then it would be in our interest to ask how we can prepare to engage with new forms of consciousness in the postphysical state. In a sense, this constitutes a postmodern approach to the question of self-transformation. The self is no longer considered a center of being but a collage of attributes that is seemingly held together by a prescribed identity based on physical symbols. When these symbols recede or unravel at death, the meaning of consciousness takes on new dimensions that are related to nonphysical states of being. The transformation of the self during this moment of change in consciousness is considered critical for practitioners of dying techniques. For these practitioners, the issue of identity at death is not at risk but the movement of consciousness in new directions poses vital questions for the reconfiguration of the self. To die a good death implies an understanding of how postmortem consciousness can be strategically manipulated to effect new levels of being.

Various meditation techniques have been developed for invigorating postmortem consciousness. For actualizing this consciousness, it has been suggested by practitioners such as Lief (2001) that we meditate frequently on our own deaths. We imagine the separation of consciousness from our physical bodies and our fading from the physical world. By doing this, we heighten our postmortem consciousness by familiarizing ourselves with the continuity of consciousness after death. Fear of death is thus reduced since this technique breaks down the rigid boundaries between life and death. We begin to approach death not as the end of ourselves but as a metamorphosis of being that is the very nature of

existence. The self is not lost at death but undergoes subtle changes that are experienced even as we contemplate on our eventual demise.

Another technique that has received public attention in recent years is the Tibetan Buddhist practice of *phowa* or the transference of consciousness at death (Lama Yeshe 1991; Gyatso 2000). Based on the Indian metaphysical theory of subtle energy points in the body, *phowa* is essentially a focused meditation on shifting the node of subtle consciousness centered in the heart *chakra* to the crown *chakra*. *Chakras* are energy points located along the central channel called the *sushumna* that runs parallel to the spinal column. There are seven *chakras* in this channel. When consciousness reaches the crown *chakra* at the top of the head, it can be expelled at the moment of death. This technique is practiced in relation to the understanding that exit of consciousness through other openings in the body may not necessarily lead to better rebirths. Preferably, this consciousness is directed into the heart of Amitabha (one of the five *dhyani*, or meditation buddhas) for a higher rebirth that results in the refinement of consciousness. Through *phowa* practice, death becomes a point of transition in the remaking of the self for higher purposes that transcend physical reality.

A third technique focuses on the collection of thought during dying moments. As we die, our thinking processes may become sluggish or cloudy, but it is possible to maintain a high level of concentration on final thoughts that will influence the direction of consciousness at death. Foos-Graber (1989, 213-15) considered this technique to be a fail-safe method for successfully exiting the physical body, especially in the event of a sudden death. The nature of final thoughts is said to be of utmost importance in the transformation of the self at death. By concentrating these thoughts in a positive manner, particularly in relation to a religious figure or object or to the light source associated with all existence, death provides a passage to higher consciousness.

All these techniques of dying require guided and regular practice, so that a person is habitually oriented to the means by which postmortem consciousness is effectively managed and directed beyond physical reality. Training to die is also embedded within religious contexts that provide the necessary symbolic system for enabling the dying person to understand the passage of death. Although many recently published manuals of dying refer to the Hindu and Buddhist symbolic systems, there is no reason why other religious systems cannot be fruitfully culled for arriving at a more comprehensive approach to the art of dying. Learning the techniques of dying from various cultural viewpoints is essentially an antidote to the fear of dying amplified by the condition of modern living. It is an antidote that frees consciousness to enter post-physical states of being.

Thus, techniques of dying are not the means to overcome death but the fear of death, to facilitate the movement of consciousness beyond the physical realm. In understanding and practicing these techniques, death is demystified as a sphere of the unknown.

### THE FUTURE OF DEATH

It is not too farfetched to imagine a world in which fear of death has been eliminated and postmortem consciousness accepted as an undisputed corollary of dying. But such a world is not here yet. The fear of death is still ingrained in our minds. Skepticism of postmortem consciousness abounds. Despite years of paranormal research and studies of near-death experiences, we are still socialized to regard death as a feared event but one that cannot be postponed or avoided. In Kübler-Ross's model of dying (1970), acceptance of death is the final stage in the dying process. But why wait until we are at that stage?

Death education is vital in the sense that both dying patients and healthy people can be introduced to the meaning of death within the context of cultural, religious, and paranormal research that sheds light on the concept of postmortem consciousness. Unless such education is available, people in general will continue to have doubts about the continuity of consciousness after death. These doubts suggest that we now stand at a crossroad that can either alter our conceptions of death or lock us in fear of death. The quest for modernity has increased our fear of death because the possession of modern knowledge does not seem to be compatible with an understanding of postmortem consciousness. Modern science emphasizes the empirical nature of consciousness within the limits of our ability to act in the world of the living. It ignores and dismisses anything outside those limits. It has little or nothing to say about death since death lies beyond those limits. This road leads to a nihilistic view of death. It offers no picture, expectation, or hope of existence beyond death.

To embark on the other journey to seek the meaning of postmortem consciousness assumes that we have become more receptive to the idea of postphysical existence. While we cannot simply dismiss the growing literature on near-death experiences and paranormal phenomena as frivolous, we can be discriminating about the type of observations and data emerging from this expanding field of research. It is this field that is broadening our understanding of death, not as a desultory departure from planet earth but as a poignant insight into the very nature of the self and the versatility of its consciousness. To take this road does not imply that we have abandoned modern science. On the contrary, we seek rapprochement with modern science in death research and education in

order to expunge nihilism from the confines of a strict empiricism. The accomplishment of this goal is still far off, but the growing awareness that death is not the end promises a new future in the development of our knowledge of life and death.

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