

Unblocking a malfunction in consciousness by John Wren-Lewis

As a follow-on to the review above, here are adapted extracts from an article in *The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology* (Vol. 26, Number 2, 1994) entitled 'Aftereffects of Near-Death Experience: A survival mechanism hypothesis' (subs. US\$24; editorial address 345 California Avenue, Suite No. 1, Palo Alto, California 94306); followed by extracts from an article in *Gnosis Magazine* (Winter 1995) entitled 'Gnosis: Goal or Ground?' (subs. US\$35 from PO Box 14217, San Francisco, California 94114).

Over the past few years some researchers have begun to turn their attention to the remarkable effects of Near-Death Experiences (NDEs) in this life. NDEs almost always leave the experiencers freer, happier people than they've ever before dreamed possible.

Moreover, while this new-found capacity for joy in living seems to drive all NDE-ers to use religious language in trying to do it justice, it doesn't necessarily involve any particular conviction that the soul is going to survive the body's death. It's more like a basic shift in consciousness whereby life in each moment becomes so vivid that anxiety about future survival, in the body or out of it, simply ceases to be important.

The hypothesis I've come up with is that the block which cuts off so-called normal human consciousness from its roots in that other, impersonal consciousness, is some kind of inflation or hyperactivity of the psychological survival-system. Exactly how or when this originated in the history of our species I have no idea, and at present don't propose to speculate. But the effect of this hyper-defensiveness is to focus individual consciousness so rigidly on the business of securing its own future that the underlying universal consciousness, with its every-present-moment happiness, peace and wonder, gets shut out. The only satisfaction allowed into awareness is that which comes from meeting the needs (or supposed needs) of the individual body-mind, while pain becomes wholly negative suffering instead of a life-enhancing signal. And this basic malfunction is epitomised in the fact that dying, which in nature is simply part of life's great flow (or of that secondary game called individual manifestation), becomes the object of ultimate fear and horror, with all the catastrophic psycho-social consequences to which Ernest Becker and others have directed attention (Becker, 1973).

Close encounter with death is able to break this whole spell because the survival-mechanism gives up at this point which I'm sure is why the Tibetan Book of the Dead (Evans-Wentz, 1960) calls the dying-moment a time of special grace when Nirvana can suddenly become apparent to anyone. And this is why some who return from the brink of death have been privileged to come back knowing what consciousness really is - knowledge which, once acquired, enables the survival-mechanisms to resume functioning without their former hyperactivity. I've observed that, since Thailand, my feeling about death, my own included, is that, although I still intend to avoid it as long as possible in life's secondary game and still mourn the loss of friends, it has in itself a very special kind of beauty, like the dying leaves of autumn, whose splendour we are allowed to see in ordinary consciousness because our minds don't associate it with the ultimate taboo. A corollary of this changed attitude to death has been the discovery that ageing, including even its more obvious decay-aspects, has become interesting rather than depressing or disgusting.

The big question now, of course, is whether there are less drastic (and less haphazard) means by which the spell of separated selfhood can be lifted before the moment of death, and I hope my research may eventually shed some light on this. For while there are mystical traditions the world over which offer 'paths to higher consciousness', it doesn't seem to me that any of them has a very encouraging success rate in bringing about the kind of liberation which NDEs can bring immediately to anyone, high or low, good or bad, believing or unbelieving, trained or untrained. In fact, my studies of these traditions, ancient and modern alike, suggest that while there are almost always valuable insights to be gained from them, they all get bogged down in their own basic idea of a 'path', which inevitably suggests that 'higher consciousness' is a goal to be achieved, thereby reinforcing that very preoccupation with one's personal future which is the cause of all the trouble (Wren-Lewis, 1991).

My experience, and that of NDE-ers generally, suggests that liberation isn't at all a matter of taking 'the long voyage Home'. It simply means waking up to the consciousness which is already the basis of our very existence, but is, as G. K. Chesterton used to put it, so large and close and obvious that it escapes notice. What I suspect we need is not any kind of path or discipline, but a collection of tricks or devices for catching the Dark at the corner of the eye, as it were, and learning how to spot its just-waiting-to-be-seen presence, combined with strategies for stopping the hyperactive survival-programmes from immediately explaining the perception away. D. E. Harding's exercises for discovering one's own essential 'headlessness' are the best ideas I've yet come across for the first half of this process, but, by his own admission, most people 'get it but simply don't believe it' (Harding, 1961, 1988, 1990, 1992) this, I suspect, is precisely evidence of the survival-program at work, and in my view there is no more important task facing transpersonal psychology than research into techniques for circumventing this fundamental malfunction in humanity's 'software'.

[Continuing with adapted extracts from *Gnosis Magazine*:]

It feels quintessentially natural that personal consciousness should be aware of its own Ground, while my first 59-odd years of so-called 'normal' consciousness, in ignorance of that Ground, now seem like a kind of waking dream. It was

as if I'd been entranced from birth into a collective nightmare of separate individuals struggling in an alien universe for survival, satisfaction, and significance.

Indeed the more I investigate, the more convinced I become that iconoclastic mystics like Blake and Jiddu Krishnamurti were right in asserting that the very idea of a spiritual path is necessarily self-defeating, because it does the one thing that has to be undone if there is to be awakening to eternity: it concentrates attention firmly on 'futurity'. Paths and disciplines make gnosis a goal, when in fact it is already the ground of all knowing, including 'sinful' time-bound knowing.

I know from first-hand experience that the 'joy beyond joy' is greater than the wildest imaginations of a consciousness bogged down in time. But I can also see that the very impulse to seek the joy of eternity is a Catch-22, because seeking itself implies a preoccupation with time, which is precisely what drives eternity out of awareness.

So what to do? One thing I learned in my former profession of science was the right kind of lateral thinking can often bring liberation from Catch-22 situations, provided the Catch-22 is faced in its full starkness, without evasions in the form of metaphysical speculations beyond experience. This is the exploration to which my life is now dedicated. It's a research project in which anyone who's interested can join.

I'll end with a couple of cautionary hints. First, beware of philosophies that put spiritual concerns into a framework of growth or evolution, which I believe are the great modern idols. Both are important phenomena of eternity's time-theatre, but as paradigms they're old hat, hangovers from the age of empire-building and the work ethic. The 'I want it now' attitude, so often deplored by spiritual pundits as a twentieth-century sin, is in my view a very healthy sign that we are beginning to be disillusioned with time-entrainment. A truly mystical paradigm has to be post-evolutionary, paradigm of lila, divine play for its own sake, where any purposes along the line of time, great or small, are subordinate to the divine satisfaction that is always present in each eternal instant. Mystical gnosis is knowing the instant-by-instant delight of Infinite Aliveness in all manifestation, irrespective of whether, from the purely human standpoint, the manifestation is creative or destructive, growing or withering, evolving towards some noetic Omega or fading out.

My second warning is to mind your language, for the words we use are often hooks that catch us into time-entrainment. For example, when we use the term 'self' with a small 's' to describe individual personhood, and 'Self' with a capital 'S' for the fullness of God-consciousness, the notion of the one gradually expanding into the other becomes almost inescapable, again concentrating attention along the time line. Mystical liberation, by contrast, is the sudden discovery that even the meanest self is already a focus of the Infinite Aliveness that is beyond any kind of selfhood. Against this background, the main positive advice I would give to spiritual seekers is to experiment with any practice or idea that seems interesting - which is what the Buddha urged a long time ago, though not too many of his followers have ever taken that part of his teaching seriously. Ancient traditions and modern movements alike may be very valuable as databases for new adventures, but to treat them as authorities to be obeyed is not only 'unscientific' - it seems to go against the grain of the divine lila itself, since novelty is apparently the name of the time game.

I suspect gnosis comes as 'grace' because there are as many different forms of it as there are people. Yet because we're all in this together, sharing experience is integral to its fullness. Whatever experiments you make, share your 'failures', your hints and guesses, and your awakening too if it happens, with warts-and-all honesty, because 'everything that lives is holy'.

John Wren-Lewis