

Life Reviews in Near-Death Experiences and in Theosophy

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ABSTRACT: Accounts of life reviews have been most notably captured through near-death experience (NDE) accounts and have come into prominence over the past five decades, mirroring greater popular and academic interest and awareness of NDEs. Life review accounts were also known historically across time and have more recently been reported in accounts in French language medical publications from the 1800s. Less known are the life review accounts published in Theosophical writings in the late 1800s and early 1900s. In this article, we overview some Theosophical literature that references life reviews as they occurred in the context of Theosophical descriptions of the death process, propose potential origins of the accounts, and then discuss their implications in light of Theosophical understandings.

KEYWORDS: near-death experience, life review, theosophy, Theosophical Society, exceptional abilities

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Suddenly, my whole life flashed before my eyes. This only took a split second, yet I could see it all, every bit of it, down to the last detail. (Participant 855 (13), B. Greyson private collection of near-death experience narratives)

From early childhood, I quickly relived my life, stopping momentarily in life situations that seemed to have more meaning than others. I then said to myself, “It’s true what they say: Your entire life flashes before your eyes.” (Participant 435 (14), B. Greyson private collection of near-death experience narratives)

Experiences such as those quoted above are typically recounted by people who have survived a close brush with death. This spontaneous process of recollecting experiences that have occurred throughout one’s life has come to be known as a ‘life review’ (Greyson, 2021, pp. 36–44). Contemporary understandings of life reviews have been heavily influenced by research in the past five decades after the publication of Raymond Moody’s (1975) book *Life After Life*, which served as a catalyst for systematic investigations of near-death experiences (NDEs): unusual phenomena involving temporo-spatial transcendence that often occur on the precipice of life and death. Life reviews can be a feature of NDEs, and when they are reported in the context of such experiences, they are typically first-person phenomenological accounts. Accounts of this nature in recent decades have, to date, been derived mostly from English-speaking populations in the United States, United Kingdom, and Western Europe. Pre-dating this contemporary pool of scholarly knowledge were published accounts dating back millennia, as noted below. Furthermore, life review descriptions can be found in the French and English literature of the late 1800s, with one as early as the late 1700s.

Even less known, however, are life review descriptions in literature published in the past two centuries by the Theosophical Society (TS), which was founded in New York in 1875. The key founders were Helena Blavatsky, Colonel H. S. Olcott, and W. Q. Judge. The objectives of the TS are:

1. To form a nucleus of the Universal Brotherhood of Humanity, without distinction of race, creed, sex, caste, or color.
2. To encourage the study of comparative religion, philosophy, and science.
3. To investigate unexplained laws of Nature and the powers latent in man. (HandWiki, 2022)

Blavatsky was a prolific writer of articles and books. Her main work was *The Secret Doctrine* (1888), which aimed to reconcile ancient Eastern wisdom with modern science. Theosophy maintains that all great religions have the same source: Wisdom Religion. Its key teachings highlight altruistic ethics and human spiritual evolution through reincarnation guided by the law of karma (Blavatsky, 1889/1972). Despite its high ideals, the TS fragmented soon after Blavatsky died in 1891. Today, the modern Theosophical Movement is represented by multiple organizations (Santucci, 2001, 270–279).

This collective body of works about life reviews, including that of the TS, suggests they were a known phenomenon at least 200 years ago and represent important historical contributions to understanding life reviews that complement the pool of contemporary knowledge embedded within NDE scholarly literature. The purpose of this article, therefore, is to overview contemporary understandings of life reviews as they occur in the context of NDEs, as well as the known historical reports. Because accounts from the Theosophical literature have previously received limited scholarly consideration, we pay particular attention to such accounts and discuss their alignment with Theosophical afterlife beliefs. We then consider the implications of this pool of life review knowledge.

Contemporary Understandings of Life Reviews

Although the term ‘life review’ is now most popularly linked to NDEs, whereby the person was physically compromised to the point of appearing to die or actually did die, they have also been reported by people who felt a physiological or psychological threat of death but were not physiologically compromised, were not close to death, and/or did not die (Holden & Guest, 1990). Additionally, over the past 70 years ‘life review therapy,’ which is a guided, systematic, thorough review of major life events, has been a tool for counselors working with people at the end of life to help them cope with loss, guilt, conflict, or defeat, and to find meaning in their lives and accomplishments (Butler, 1963; Haber, 2006). Although this counseling tactic may have been inspired by life reviews that occur in the context of NDEs, this helpful therapeutic technique differs markedly in its precipitants, contents, emotional valence, and perceived origins, from the spontaneous, involuntary reliving of events in the life reviews that occur in the context of NDEs.

Although the prevalence of life reviews in non-NDE populations is currently unknown (Katz et al., 2017), recent figures indicate that an

estimated 13–50% of those who have had an NDE report spontaneous memory recall as part of that experience (Cassol et al., 2018; Greyson, 2021, p. 41; Pacciolla, 1996; van Lommel et al., 2001). Neither the catalyst for the NDE nor any specific demographic characteristics of the person having the NDE have been reliably linked to the occurrence or phenomenology of the life review (Stevenson & Cook, 1995), although some researchers have speculated that life reviews are more common in NDEs precipitated by sudden and unexpected brushes with death (Greyson, 1985; Noyes & Kletti, 1977).

The characteristics of a life review are specific to the person experiencing it, yet they typically involve a rapid revival of memories as well as several other key features. Table 1 provides some examples of life reviews voluntarily shared with co-author Greyson by near-death experiencers who were well-known to him and whom he had vetted to assure that they had, indeed, been in documented near-death situations and had had typical NDEs: unusual psychological experiences of consciousness that may have involved cognitive, transcendental, affective, and paranormal features, and scores above 7 on the NDE Scale (Greyson, 1983). The life review descriptions quoted in the table were extracted from experiencers' spontaneous accounts of their NDEs. The various descriptions offered by these participants included references to different phenomenological aspects of life reviews, which were coded into four categories of time distortion, extensive memory recollection, affective awareness, and a nonjudging companion, categories that emerged through an inductive analysis strategy. We describe these four categories and provide illustrative examples in more detail below.

Life reviews can involve *time distortions*, unusual perceptions of time relative to the quantity of information acquired, as well as the order such information is presented. Some people have reported life memories that were recollected in a matter of seconds, whereas others suggest the duration of the experience was qualitatively 'timeless,' making its objective length difficult to determine. Although some experiencers report a sequential chronology—re-living moments of their life retrospectively back to their childhood, others report anterograde life reviews that move from events in early childhood through to the present moment (Katz et al., 2017). Conversely, some life reviews have been reported as panoramic, such that each event was revealed instantaneously with every other event, yet the individual was still able to comprehend the entire memory recollection (Noyes & Kletti, 1977; Stevenson & Cook, 1995).

Life reviews can involve *extensive memory recollection*. This phenom-

enon often manifests as remembering events that extend across the entire course of one’s life and can include long-forgotten occurrences from the past, such as those experienced during very early childhood. Other life reviews reportedly include a series of episodic memories of very

Table 1 *Key Features of Near-Death Experience Life Reviews With Examples from Experiencer Narratives*

Life Review Feature	Life Review Account
Time Distortion	<p>Then, rather suddenly, I was remembering events that had happened earlier in my life. However, it was not simply remembering or dreaming. It was more like seeing a color movie about myself. I cannot now remember each episode, but they were scenes from school, from visits to my grandparents’ apartment, from my house, and playing with friends in a field. These scenes appeared to be occurring in “real time” and were extremely realistic.</p>
	<p>You don’t see Day One, and now – wait a minute – you’ve got to see it in slow motion, now in the capacity of everybody else that’s around you. No, you will see all of those things simultaneously.</p>
	<p>At the time the accident was occurring, I saw my life flash before my eyes. I was mesmerized. It was the strangest thing I’d ever encountered. Here before me, on what looked like filmstrip, was my whole life. The filmstrip flashed by so fast that it seemed like an instant, and my whole life was viewed. Yet at the same time – and this was the weirdest, most bizarre aspect of this experience – I actually stopped at certain frames and recalled certain lifetime experiences, such as fond memories or kindnesses. This occurred simultaneously: seeing my whole life pass by and simultaneously stopping to view past memories. I thought this couldn’t possibly be, and yet it was happening to me. This confirmed for me that time, as we know it, doesn’t exist. The past, the present, and the future are all happening in the now.</p>
Extensive Memory Recollection	<p>I began to see my life before me, instantly, on a huge television screen and in living three-dimensional color. It was all there – not a detail was missing – even things I had not thought of for years.</p>
	<p>As this takes place, you have total knowledge. You have the ability to be a psychologist, a psychiatrist, a psychoanalyst, and much more. You are your own spiritual teacher, maybe for the first and only time in your life. You are simultaneously the student and the teacher in a relationship . . . My life review was part of this experience also. It was absolutely, positively, everything basically from the first breath of life right through the accident. It was that panoramic view that you have the ability to read about in certain works. It was everything.</p>
	<p>Every single event of my life from earliest childhood to the plane crash projected in front of me. There were details concerning people and things that I had forgotten about long ago.</p>

Affective Awareness	<p>During this panoramic “slide show,” I re-experienced events which were pleasant as well as unpleasant, but I am unable to provide a detailed report because it was as if all of the events occurred simultaneously, as if within a split second.</p>
	<p>I also experienced it exactly as though I was my Aunt Gay . . . I knew the series of thoughts that bounced back and forth in her mind . . . Thought-pattern after thought-pattern. What I’m telling you is, I was in my Aunt Gay’s body, I was in her eyes, I was in her emotions, I was in her unanswered questions. I experienced the disappointment, the humiliation. It was very devastating to me. It changed my attitude quite a bit as I experienced it.</p>
	<p>For me, it was a total reliving of every thought I had ever thought, every word I had ever spoken, and every deed I had ever done; plus the effect of each thought, word, and deed on everyone and anyone who had ever come within my environment or sphere of influence, whether I knew them or not (including unknown passersby on the street); plus the effect of each thought, word, and deed on weather, plants, animals, soil, trees, water, and air.</p>
Non-Judging Companion	<p>What next occurred was the replay of my life. It was not on a screen or a tube, but rather I “relived” the events. I had always thought that seeing one’s life was a flash before the eyes, but this experience lasted several hours. He took me back to the beginning, perhaps to the age of reason, and in each instance where there had been wrongdoing on my part, he “touched my shoulder” and implied forgiveness. It was as if I were brought back to each first occurrence of a character defect – my first lie, first act of envy, lust – and then forgiven by this Mighty Being at every turn. He implied that I was only human, and therefore okay. Again, I did not see this Being, nor did we speak aloud. We communicated through thought. I was also brought back to “turning points,” where helpful acts on my part first formulated the character and makeup of me, although today I cannot pinpoint a single one of these. I am just certain that we visited each of these acts, as we did the character flaw occurrences. We relived these events for what seemed like several hours, and at each negative juncture, where I demonstrated a defect or flaw, He forgave me, dismissing the error as only human.</p>

specific events, some of which were particularly meaningful, whereas others are described as more mundane, everyday occurrences of no particular significance to the person when they happened (Stevenson & Cook, 1995). Whether occurring as continuous and life-long or isolated and episodic, life reviews are invariably described as exceptionally vivid and realistic, as if the person is re-living every moment in detail (Noyes & Kletti, 1977).

An *affective awareness* is also a common feature of life reviews. Depending on the perceived importance of the recalled event, the experiencer may also feel an emotional component, often described as

re-living the actual emotions felt during the remembered event, but which can also include experiencing emotions while re-visiting the event as part of the life review. Intriguingly, this affective awareness is not always individualized to the person having the life review. Some people have reported being aware of the impact life events had on other people, including the emotions and thoughts those others experienced. This aspect of a life review can also involve the individual re-living aspects of an event as if they are another person who is part of the memory. For example, they may recall a memory that involves their mother, and during the recollection of that memory they become aware of the thoughts and emotions of their mother and experience them from her subjective perspective, before returning to experience the event from their own first-person perspective (Farr, 1993; Greyson, 2021, pp. 40–44; Whitfield, 1998).

Life reviews may also involve a *non-judgmental companion*. Those who report the experiences often indicate they were not the sole observers to their lifetime of recollected memories. Rather, another entity, typically described as a spiritual being, also witnessed the recollection, sometimes communicating with the individual about specific events or episodes that had occurred across the lifetime (Greene & Krippner, 1990). More often however, the spiritual being served as an impartial observer, making no judgments about any aspects of the life review, instead imparting a sentiment of unconditional love and acceptance to the person reviewing their own life (Stevenson & Cook, 1995).

Life Reviews in Historical Literature

Life Reviews in Non-Theosophical Sources

Although the examples in Table 1 illustrate how life reviews are recalled contemporaneously, comparable life review accounts have been recorded for millennia. Life reviews can be found in Greek and Roman sources (Walker & Serdahely, 1990) and various Medieval narratives (Zaleski, 1987). One of the best-known early English-language examples of a life review is the account of the Irish Admiral Sir Francis Beaufort, who recorded what appears to be a life review after nearly drowning in 1795 (Beaufort, 1858). Not dissimilar to the accounts depicted above, he described a rapid panoramic retrograde recollection of his entire life, including long-forgotten memories, with each act being “accompanied by a consciousness of right or wrong, or by some reflection on its cause or its consequences” (Noyes & Kletti, 1977, p. 182). It was not until the mid-1800s that descriptions of experiences

reflecting life reviews, known then as panoramic memories, made a re-appearance in English-language literary works. In his overview, Alvarado (2011) suggested war injuries, falls, and hangings were often the contexts facilitating the life reviews reported in such literature, although toward the latter part of the 1800s life reviews were predominantly described within the context of drownings and often mentioned in medical literature of the time.

Although it is now acknowledged that NDEs were discussed in French philosophy and medical articles—although the expression *experiences de morte imminente* was used—during the late 1800s (e.g., Egger, 1896), and Heim (1892) provided the first systematic documentation of NDEs—including his own detailed life review as he fell during an Alpine climb), less well-known are the series of papers specifically referencing panoramic memories that appeared in the French journal *Revue Philosophique de la France et de l'Étranger* [Philosophical Review of France and Abroad]. Authored by prominent physicians and psychologists of the time, such as Paul August Sollier, Charles Fere, Henri Pieron, and Victor Egger, the papers largely focused on descriptions of panoramic memories obtained from their patients, as well as debates about various theoretical causal mechanisms for the experiences—none of which were based on systematic investigations. Nevertheless, these papers seem to have been fueled by wider societal curiosity about unusual mental phenomena, including hypnosis and dissociative states, thus making them relevant foci of scholarly attention at the time (Alvarado, 2011).

Life Reviews in Theosophical Sources

The 19th century French papers about life reviews were not the sole source of information about the phenomena. A simultaneous dissemination of experiences that appear to describe life reviews was published in works distributed by the TS.

In the early years of the TS, many people received letters purported to be from *Mahatmas*, Morya and Koot Hoomi, whom Blavatsky and other key founders of the TS considered an inspiration behind the founding and development of the TS. The first letter was received by Blavatsky's relative in 1870. The letters received by A. P. Sinnett between 1880 and 1884 contain philosophical and spiritual teachings and address activities in the early TS (Chin, 1993). In addition to Blavatsky's work, the Mahatma letters are considered a central source of Theosophical teachings. However, they created a controversy when the

Society for Psychical Research (SPR) published a report on the Mahatmas and their letters in 1885 (Report of the Committee Appointed to Investigate Phenomena Connected with the Theosophical Society, 1885). Although the controversies are not the focus of our work, we provide detail of them for context. The SPR report stated, among other things, that the letters from the two Mahatmas were forgeries written by Blavatsky herself. The controversy was settled a century later when Vernon Harrison, an expert on forgery, examined the evidence of the case and concluded that: "I find no evidence that the Mahatma Letters were written by Madame Blavatsky..." (Harrison, 1997). Harrison's work led to the SPR report in 1986 with its heading saying that Blavatsky "was unjustly condemned."

It is within one of these letters from the Mahatmas that the first description appears of an experience corresponding to a life review. Sent in 1882, the letter stated:

At the last moment, the whole life is reflected in our memory and emerges from all the forgotten nooks and corners, picture after picture, one event after the other. The dying brain dislodges memory with a strong supreme impulse, and memory restores faithfully every impression entrusted to it during the period of the brain's activity . . . the *brain thinks* and the *Ego* lives over in those few brief seconds his whole life over again. (Chin, 1993, p. 326)

Several years later, Blavatsky (1889/1972) provided a description of the moment of death, which included characteristics strikingly similar to contemporary life reviews:

At the solemn moment of death every man, even when death is sudden, sees the whole of his past life marshalled before him, in its minutest details. For one short instant the personal becomes one with the individual and all-knowing Ego. But this instant is enough to show him the whole chain of causes which have been at work during his life. He sees and now understands himself as he is, unadorned by flattery or self-deception. He reads his life, remaining as a spectator looking down into the arena he is quitting; he feels and knows the justice of all the suffering that has overtaken him. (p. 98)

A decade after Blavatsky's publication, Annie Besant (1899) provided an account of what appears to be a life review, and it is in her narrative that the term 'panorama' is used as a descriptor of the experience: "Slowly the lord of the body draws himself away, enwrapped in the violet-grey etheric body, and absorbed in the contemplation of the panorama of his past life, which in the death-hour unrolls before him, complete in every detail" (p. 110).

A later account was provided by Pekka Ervast (1928–1929, in Marjanen et al., 2022). Ervast (1875–1934) was a pioneer in the Finnish Theosophical movement and a prolific Theosophical author. We include his teachings on death for two reasons: co-author Savinainen knows these teachings thoroughly, and they are largely consistent with those of the other Theosophical authors cited in this article. Ervast's life review account concurs with the aforementioned sources, while adding more details:

When consciousness moves to the etheric brain during death, all memories are alive in front of us. Therefore, a person reviews the past life in all its details, although this happens very fast. What has happened in life through the decades is seen within half an hour as films in memory, yet everything happens in detail, while the person is outside the whole play . . . He does not live in his reminiscences as he did while being physically alive. He just watches the great play and judges it objectively, calling each thing—depending on its own quality—as good or bad, crime or merit, and so on. He remains in a great light, so to speak . . . In fact, the viewer is the personalized higher self. (Marjanen et al., 2022, pp. 37–38)

Although the descriptions provided in these Theosophical sources suggest the authors' awareness of phenomena occurring at death, the authors did not indicate whether the accounts were a recollection of their personal experiences or those of close others—such as patients, as in the French language accounts of the late 1800s. The Theosophical accounts have a more generalist descriptive tone to them and lack the personalized details and first-person vocabulary and perspective that are often evident in accounts given by those who have had a life review as part of an NDE, such as those we provide in Table 1. Thus, beyond who published them and when, the origins of the Theosophical accounts cited here are unknown.

Life Reviews and the Afterlife in Theosophy

It is possible the Theosophical authors' descriptions were informed by Theosophical teachings, which contain rich descriptions about the afterlife. To better understand Theosophical conceptions of the various phases between life, death, and rebirth, it is necessary to acknowledge that according to Theosophical teachings, humans consist of the visible and invisible bodies, so-called seven principles whose names are derived from Sanskrit. However, for the purposes of this article, the following fourfold description is sufficient: a physical body and its etheric

double, soul (personality), and spirit (higher self). The spirit is eternal and reincarnates, whereas the personality does not reincarnate. Based on Ervast's teachings (Marjanen et al., 2022), a Theosophical description of the afterlife is provided below.

The moment of death is solemn. The first phase of dying involves the 'death struggle,' whereby the invisible etheric body leaves the physical body and the soul diverges. The etheric body rises from the feet through to the head, and then above the physical body. The life review is believed to take place usually during the death struggle, but it can also happen when the person's consciousness is in the etheric body, that is, outside the physical body. The deceased sees in a brief period of time all deeds and words and how they affected other people. The moral evaluation of past actions is possible because the observer is believed to be under the influence of the higher self. These features map well into the four categories in Table 1, but with no emotional component because the first life review is done in the light of the higher self, enabling an objective moral evaluation of the past life incidents.

As long as the silver cord, believed to connect the etheric body with the physical body, remains intact, the possibility of resuscitation remains. The deceased person experiences the etheric state as a release from the body and has a light feeling. While in the etheric body, observations of the world can be made, and the deceased person is able to appear to and converse with others still in physical form. After spending three days in the etheric realm, the person leaves the etheric body, loses consciousness, and wakes in the astral world.

At some point during astral world existence, the deceased commences a purification process whereby they relive their past life from the end to the beginning and again make judgments about their weaknesses. This phase is believed to take much more time than the first life review, typically many years. Although this recollection can be emotionally painful, it is also a valuable learning experience and will eventually pass, leaving the deceased free of earthly weaknesses and fixations. The astral life ends when the purified personality loses consciousness and wakes up in the heavenly world, which is the beginning of the longest period in the afterlife.

The purified human being relives earthly life, but in a way that reflects all the best moments from earthly life, whereby love, good will, and good deeds were enacted. Eventually the personality merges with the higher self, and the memory of the higher self is enriched by one more life. In this high state of being it is possible to remember past incarnations and look forward to the future. Importantly, the ideal of

the perfect human being is seen at the end of the heavenly state, and the higher self realizes that this ideal can only be attained on Earth. This realization creates a strong will to try again. Subsequently, an outline of the new earthly life is seen, and the process of new incarnation commences.

The question arises whether the life review accounts provided in the late 1800s and early 1900s Theosophical publications may have been a function of Theosophical teachings. That is, rather than experiencing a life review themselves, or reporting accounts they had received directly from experiencers, the authors may have been paraphrasing Theosophical beliefs. Although the life review descriptions in the Mahatma letters and Blavatsky's book were published prior to the dissemination of Heim's work and the debates occurring in the French journal *Revue Philosophique de la France et de l'Étranger*—although, of course, they could have informed the later writings of Besant and Ervast—it is possible that, assuming the accounts do not reflect the authors' own personal or directly reported experiences, the authors could have had access to other historical material citing life reviews, which could have informed their accounts, or could have informed Theosophical teachings, which then informed the life review accounts. As previously stated, NDE accounts are reflected in the narratives of cultures across the globe and extend back to the ancient Sumerians, Egyptians, and Greeks (Schroter-Kunhardt, 1993), and it is known that Blavatsky spent much time traveling through what was then known as Far East countries, prior to her establishing the Theosophical Society; thus, her travels may potentially have provided her with opportunities to access life review narratives from other cultures. However, there is no mention that the life review descriptions she gave or those given by the other Theosophical authors were based on earlier historical works.

We entertain here an alternative explanation informed by the work of Gregory Shushan (2011, 2012), who hypothesized that beliefs about the afterlife, which are so ubiquitous across humanity and central to many religious systems, may have their origin in NDEs. Although recent debates in the scholarly literature suggest NDEs occurring in the absence of physiological impediment may not be 'authentic' NDEs (Parnia et al., 2022), Shushan (2022) has argued that the 'reality' of NDEs, which for scholarly purposes is partly a function of how they are operationalized, is "irrelevant to the idea that they can inspire, influence, and even give rise to afterlife beliefs" (p. 5).

Therefore, we propose that life reviews, perhaps experienced during the course of an NDE, have informed Theosophical teachings. The

predominance of similarities between Theosophical beliefs and NDE reports in general cannot be denied. For example, similar to out-of-body experiences (OBEs) often reported by near-death experiencers (NDErs), the Theosophical teachings describe the viewing of oneself 'from above the physical body.' The joyous meeting of deceased loved ones and spiritual beings is often part of NDE stories as well as of the Theosophical teachings. The main lesson that most NDErs enthusiastically report is that of love, which is the essence of the Theosophical descriptions of life in heaven as well as the purpose of earthly life. Finally, the life review reports of NDErs are very similar to the afterlife beliefs espoused by the Theosophical teachings. Although the source of any original NDEs that may have informed the afterlife beliefs of the Theosophical teachings is not known, the proposition that NDEs, and life reviews in particular, *influence* such beliefs is certainly plausible, but remains difficult to ascertain with any certainty. Indeed, we must contend that the opposite explanation is also possible: that Theosophical teachings inform the phenomenology of the NDE and life review in particular as it is unfolding. Although a slightly more challenging proposition to accept with such limited information—especially because most contemporary NDErs who reported life reviews were likely unaware of Theosophical teachings—we acknowledge that it may be possible nonetheless.

Consequently, we propose a final hypothesis for the appearance of life review descriptions in the Theosophical writings. Rather than being an exclusive function of a near-death or actual death state, what happens when we die, and the life review component in particular, may also be accessible through non-death altered states of consciousness. Although life reviews are most commonly linked to NDEs, that they can occur in the absence of a close brush with death (Holden & Guest, 1990) suggests that NDEs may be but one *facilitator*—among many—of life reviews. Thus, another source of the Theosophical teachings may be life reviews that occurred during altered states of consciousness outside the circumstances of a close brush with death.

For example, the Theosophical teachings are largely derived from the writings of Blavatsky (1889/1972), who proposed that their epistemological genesis is a consequence of direct communication with the divine reality and that such communication was possible for all people, as the ability for communion already exists as *latent supersensible abilities*. These abilities are invisible aspects of each human being—known as the etheric body, soul, and/or spirit—that can be activated through sustained meditation and moral self-education (e.g., Ervast, 1915/2010;

Steiner, 1904/1994). As such, life reviews may also be volitionally facilitated as a function of this activation. Recent developments in psychedelic medicine, as well as more established findings related to meditative practices, suggest non-ordinary states of consciousness can be facilitated by the volitional undertaking of consciousness altering practice and guided to achieve personal transformation. Both anecdotal and scholarly accounts suggest psychedelic substances can generate remarkable changes to conscious states that enable the experimenter to access specific information that may not have been deemed accessible from the perspective of everyday waking consciousness (Griffiths et al., 2006, 2011, 2016, 2018, 2019). Meditative traditions are also widely regarded as facilitating states of consciousness that provide the experimenter with information that is personally meaningful, as well as universally relevant (Kornfield, 2009; Salzberg, 2020).

The implication of the Theosophical teachings, as well these contemporary research findings, is that various states associated with death, including the life review, can be facilitated, not by presumed or verified physical death alone as in the case of NDEs—or at least ‘authentic’ NDEs that meet the ‘recalled experience of death’ (RED) criteria recently proposed by Parnia et al. (2022)—but by pursuing activities that involve an altered state of consciousness, such as the latent supersensible abilities, to induce a completely controlled and conscious experience. This proposal implies the information about life reviews that is embedded in Theosophical works and, indeed, Theosophical teachings in general, rather than being informed exclusively by NDEs—or life reviews in particular—as Shushan’s hypothesis implies, may instead be additionally or exclusively informed by non-death-related experiences that can be volitionally facilitated.

Conclusion

Life reviews hold an important place in the pool of cosmic knowledge. They occur during a special state of receptivity and, indeed, *are* a special state of receptivity, whereby the boundaries of what is considered ‘ordinary’ and what is considered ‘extraordinary’ are transcended, such as during an NDE. Whether they occur within the context of an NDE or, as Theosophical teachings might point to, are altered states entirely accessible through the remembering, re-cognition, and re-ignition of supersensible abilities, life reviews remain intriguing phenomena that contravene prevailing understandings of memory retention and retrieval, linear time, and, indeed, the very nature of

consciousness as espoused in Western scholarship. A much deeper exploration of the implications of these experiences and their association with Theosophical teachings might reveal much about how we humans live life, the meaning and purpose we derive from it, how we treat others, and, perhaps most intriguingly, how we view death. Further investigation and contemplation of the Theosophical teachings might provide a useful bridge for addressing such questions and, therefore, seems warranted.

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