

Death and Rebirth in LSD Therapy: An Autobiographical Study

Muerte y Renacimiento en Psicoterapia con LSD: Un Estudio Autobiográfico

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Abstract

This article explores the dynamic of death and rebirth in LSD therapy beyond ego-death. Drawing upon my experience in 73 high dose LSD sessions conducted between 1979 and 1999, it asks three questions: (1) Why does death become as large as it sometimes does in psychedelic therapy? (2) Why does death repeat itself so many times? And (3) what is actually dying and being reborn in this extended transformative process? It argues that death and rebirth is a cycle that repeats itself at different stages of initiation into the universe. While its core dynamic is always the same, the experiential texture of each death – its flavor, focus, and function – changes as deeper levels of reality open, requiring us to move beyond a model of individual transformation and beyond a focus on ego-death.

Keywords: transpersonal theory, LSD, psychedelic therapy, ego-death, perinatal, death and rebirth, psychedelics and philosophy, collective consciousness.

Resumen

Este artículo explora la dinámica de muerte y el renacimiento que tiene lugar en la terapia de LSD más allá de la muerte del ego. Basándome en mis experiencias en 73 sesiones con dosis altas de LSD realizadas entre 1979 y 1999, el artículo se formula tres preguntas: (1) ¿Por qué la muerte se convierte en algo tan grande como a veces sucede en la terapia psicodélica? (2) ¿Por qué la muerte se repite tantas veces durante la terapia?, y (3) ¿Qué es lo que está realmente muriendo y renaciendo a lo largo de este extenso proceso transformador? En el artículo se argumenta que la muerte y el renacimiento es un ciclo que se repite en diferentes etapas de iniciación en el universo. Mientras que su dinámica central es siempre la misma, la textura de la experiencia de cada muerte -su sabor, el enfoque y la función- cambia en la medida en que se van abriendo niveles más profundos de la realidad, lo que nos obliga a ir más allá de un modelo de transformación individual y más allá de un modelo enfocado en la muerte del ego.

Palabras clave: transpersonal theory, LSD, psychedelic therapy, ego-death, perinatal, death and rebirth, psychedelics and philosophy, collective consciousness.

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Introduction

The experience of dying and being reborn is one of the central dynamics of deep psychedelic work (Grof, 1980, 1985, 1988). Death is the price one is often asked to pay to gain access to the myriad worlds that lie beyond the body-mind ego, death not as a metaphor or symbolic enactment but the agonizing loss of everything you know to be real and true, the spasm of your last breath, the terrifying surrender. Death comes in many shapes and sizes. It may steal in softly, melting your resistance slowly, or break through the door violently with drums pounding. Either way, if we want to experience the deeper currents and hidden secrets of the cosmos, sooner or later death calls to us.

In this essay I want to share some reflections on the dynamics of death and rebirth as I experienced them over the course of a 20 year psychedelic self-experiment I undertook between 1979 and 1999. Specifically, I want to ask three questions about this process: (1) Why does death become as large as it sometimes does in psychedelic therapy? (2) Why does death repeat itself so many times? And (3) what is actually dying and being reborn in this extended transformative process? In attempting to answer these questions, I also want to revise the discussion of death and rebirth I published in *Dark Night, Early Dawn* (Bache, 2000).

Methodology

Let me say at the outset that I believe the incorporation of psychedelics into philosophical inquiry that began with William James (1902) represents a significant turning point in philosophy. Through systematically moving back and forth between psychedelically-generated states of consciousness and one's ordinary waking state where these experiences can be recorded and systematically evaluated, philosophical discourse is expanded and deepened. The loss of control demanded by psychedelic immersion is balanced by the rigorous demands of sustained critical inquiry. In this process I think we are witnessing the emergence of a new and valuable philosophical method (Bache, 2000: Chapter 1).

It was as a philosopher that I undertook 73 therapeutically structured LSD sessions following Stanislav Grof's protocol – completely internalized sessions with a sitter, eyeshades, and carefully selected music (Bache, 1980). There were two

periods of active work, the first lasting four years (18 sessions) and the second ten years (55 sessions), separated by a hiatus of six years during which I suspended my work for reasons that are not relevant to this inquiry. After getting my bearings in four low dose sessions (200-250 micrograms), the remaining sessions were all high dose LSD sessions at 500-600 micrograms. They were all conducted in a private residence under conditions that assured complete privacy. Set and setting were standardized and spiritually focused. Sessions started in the morning after a period of yoga and meditation and lasted all day. An account of each session was written up within 24 - 48 hours with careful attention paid to phenomenological accuracy and completeness, resulting in 355 pages of typed notes.

This paper emerges from years of attempting to reflect critically on my psychedelic experiences in the context of reports published by other psychedelic researchers, especially Stanislav Grof (Grof, 2002; Grof, 1976, 1980, 1985, 1998, 2006; Metzner, 1999, 2004; Strassman, 2001). As a qualitative heuristic study, this paper honors the insights and strategies recommended by Braud and Anderson (1998), Lincoln and Guba (2011), and Moustakas (1990) for generating strong and reliable personal narratives. As an exercise in critical autobiography, it pays particular attention to reflexivity and self-transparency (Findlay, 2002; Tracy, 2010).

As many researchers have pointed out, psychedelic therapy is an exceptionally powerful vehicle of self-exploration that unleashes many surprises (Grof, 2002; Grof, 1980; Metzner, 1999). In a sustained psychedelic inquiry, one is repeatedly forced to recast one's assumptions and recalculate what is possible. This perpetual rethinking of assumptions has certainly marked my attempts to fathom the inner workings of death and rebirth in LSD therapy.

Framing the Inquiry

For the purposes of this discussion, I'm going to divide my psychedelic journey into three broad phases – a first phase leading up to ego-death, a second phase centering on the collective death-rebirth experiences reported in *Dark Night, Early Dawn*, and a third phase marked by a deepening spiral into what I perceived to be the Divine. In a sustained regimen of psychedelic therapy, a doubling back and reprocessing of material at deeper levels is common, so I don't intend to suggest a strictly linear pattern of

development. That said, it has been my experience that when the external variables are standardized as much as possible in a long series of sessions, a gradual and somewhat systematic unfolding takes place into progressively deeper levels of consciousness.

When I began this work, I was primarily interested in spiritual enlightenment. I wanted to cleanse my system of its habitual constrictions and realize spiritual freedom. Because the spiritual traditions I had studied emphasized death of self as the gateway to liberation (Smith, 1958; Teresa of Avila, 1961; Underhill, 1961), this was my initial focus – challenging my ego, emptying my bucket of illusions, and reconnecting with my Essential Nature. Though I felt reasonably well prepared for this undertaking – 30 years old with a doctorate in philosophy of religion and socially grounded in a marriage and career – I did not fully appreciate what I was getting into. No amount of reading can completely prepare you for what you will encounter on this path. The journey turned out to be much deeper, much longer, and much wider than I ever dreamed possible in the beginning.

I chose to work in high dose *psychedelic* sessions rather than low dose *psycholytic* sessions because time for inner journeying was hard to arrange in a dual career marriage and I wanted to make the most of each session. The spiritual literature described one's karmic conditioning as being ultimately finite (Govinda, 1969; Guenther, 1974; Thera, 1962), and I naively thought that I could work through mine faster by using this accelerated method of transformation, in effect biting off larger pieces of karma in each session. I knew from Grof's early books (1976, 1977, 1980) that the sessions would be more challenging, but I thought that if I confronted my shadow conscientiously and could endure the intensity of the work, it would get me to my goal of liberation sooner. It turned out that I was completely wrong about this, or rather that *all the assumptions I was making were wrong*. I began this work thinking in terms of a therapeutic model focused on individual transformation. I found, however, that working with such high doses of LSD activated consciousness so powerfully that it expanded the scope of the work *beyond the individual and beyond personal enlightenment*.

I should mention that with the wisdom of hindsight, I don't recommend taking this aggressive an approach to the deep psyche. Though I deeply cherish the many blessings this journey gave me, they came at a certain cost. There is significant wear and tear on one's physical and subtle energy system driving it this hard, and it is

eventually painful to be immersed in depths of cosmic beauty one cannot keep. Were I to do it over again, I would adopt a gentler strategy, balancing organic with synthetic medicines, low with high doses. And if one's goal is enlightenment as this is conventionally understood, this work is better done closer to where the ego lives in the world, and that means working with lower doses¹.

The first phase of this journey lasted two years and ten sessions. These sessions were largely perinatal in nature, involving intense existential confrontations, convulsive seizures, and fetal experiences combined with many forms of surrender and dying² The physical cleansing was particularly intense. This series eventually culminated in a poignant ego-death in which my identity was turned inside out and shattered. Starting the day as a middle class, white male philosopher obsessed with the meaning of life, I was forced to become completely female and to live lives that were the opposite of "me." Stripped of all vestiges of my masculine identity, I became countless women of all shapes and sizes, women of color at the laundromat with no prospects, women trained in the art of living by television with no horizons beyond the here and now. It was the perfect hell for a male professor with layers of metaphysical and existential anguish folded into it. It wasn't women that were the problem, of course, or race or poverty; it was the tight grip that my physical and social identity had on me, telling me that "I" was not any of these. When I let go of my life as I had known it, I died...and was reborn into a new world, the extraordinarily beautiful world of the feminine explored under the arm of the Great Mother.

Why does death become as large as it sometimes does in psychedelic therapy?

Shortly after this sequence had completed itself, a second phase began that brought with it a very different series of death-rebirth experiences. After a transition in which my compassion for humanity was deeply aroused, I entered an "ocean of suffering" that eventually expanded to encompass what appeared to be the entire history of the human species. Broadly drawn, this phase lasted 28 sessions spread over four years – one and three years of active work separated by a hiatus of six years.

During this phase I was repeatedly and systematically immersed in experiences of collective anguish that shattered all frames of

reference, completely dwarfing the previous phase. The dying in these sessions was almost entirely collective; the surrender demanded was the ordeal of repeatedly opening to the sheer enormity and savagery of this ocean of pain. Two short excerpts will give the flavor of these episodes.

Excerpt #1:

When the music shifted to primal chanting, the anguish thickened into a terrible horror acted out around me on all sides. The forms of the horror were so many that there is no way to describe it. Disembowelings by the score, the mauling of lives, deaths in the thousands. Swirling forms so complex, multidimensional, and multi-thematic that isolated images do not stand out. It was war, savagery, destruction, killing, anguish. Trying to articulate it I am reminded of Dante's Inferno but sped up incredibly fast and overlaid many times. It lasted hours. (Session 13)

Excerpt #2

I don't know how to describe today, the places I was in, the destruction I was part of, the searing pain and torment of thousands of beings tortured to their breaking point and then beyond. Not individuals but waves of people. The tortures not specific but legion. Driving sitar and drums tearing me apart, plunging me into more and more primitive levels of anguish. Passing through previous levels, I eventually reached a new one I can only liken to hell itself. Unspeakable horror beyond any imaginings. I was lost in a rampaging savagery that was without bounds. The worst pictures of the world's religions only touch the surface. And yet the torment cleanses one's being. (Session 15)

My early interpretation of these experiences was to see them as constituting a deepening of ego-death, as leading to a more complete ego-death. My assumption was that if any form of death and rebirth were taking place in a session, even these very collective deaths, there were probably pieces of ego dying somewhere in the mix. What did the sensation of dying attach to if not to an ego?

Eventually, however, this assumption was overwhelmed by the sheer volume and intensity of the collective suffering involved. These episodes

went on for too many years and were too extreme in their content for me to continue seeing them as collective experiences drawn in through resonance to a "core" of unfinished ego-death. This forced me to reassess the goals and the boundaries of this entire therapeutic enterprise. The conclusion I eventually came to, both intellectually and experientially, was that these collective episodes were *not* primarily aimed at the transformation of my personal consciousness. Instead of seeing them as a deepening of ego-death, I became convinced that they were aimed at nothing less than the death and rebirth of the species mind as a whole.

Dark Night, Early Dawn was written in large part to answer the question: Why did death become as large as it did in my psychedelic journey? What is driving the healing process when it opens to such collective tracts? In that book I abandoned the person-centered narrative I had been assuming – that the goal of this therapy is the healing and transformation of the individual – and adopted an expanded narrative. By integrating Rupert Sheldrake's concept of morphic fields into Stanislav Grof's paradigm, the way opened to viewing these collective ordeals as part of a larger transformational process aimed at healing the scars of humanity's collective unconscious, scars accumulated through history and still carried in our collective memory (Sheldrake, 1981, 1988, 1991). I argued that in highly energized psychedelic states, the collective unconsciousness is sometimes activated to such a degree or in such a manner that it triggers a collective healing process. Through some fractal flip or quantum entanglement I had not anticipated or even thought possible at the time, the "patient" in my sessions had shifted from being me to being humanity itself, or some portion of humanity.

In my attempt to integrate this expanded narrative into Grof's model of consciousness, I kept the term "perinatal" for these collective ordeals while trying to expand the rationale for their appearance. Rather than let go of the perinatal vocabulary, I stretched it by proposing that a person's experience of the perinatal domain could "slant" toward one or the other pole of the personal/transpersonal interface. If one's perinatal experience slanted in the direction of the personal psyche, persons may experience the loss of their physical identity and the recovery of their spiritual identity interwoven with reliving their biological birth. On the other hand, if one's perinatal experience slanted toward the transpersonal side of the interface, persons may undergo the death-rebirth sequence in deep identification with the human species as a whole. When this happens, the

biological birth canal shifts to the birth canal of human history. The therapeutic process of making conscious the trauma of the past, of holding that trauma in one's awareness until it is reintegrated thus freeing the present from the burden of the past, seems aimed at the species mind itself. Trying to hold together Grof's theory and my experience, I further suggested that there were two tiers of death and rebirth intertwined in these episodes, one aimed at personal ego-death and a second aimed at collective ego-death (Bache, 2000).

At the present time, however, I have shifted to what I think is a simpler and more elegant way of understanding these collective episodes. My current thinking emphasizes that death and rebirth is an archetypal *cycle* that repeats itself many times as one moves through successive stages of psychedelic initiation. It is a wheel that like the wheel of the Buddha Dharma turns multiple times. Being an *archetypal* cycle, any single death-rebirth experience may incorporate material from multiple levels of reality. However, looking back at the larger trajectory of my sessions, I now recognize that this cycle was repeating itself *in different forms* as I moved into progressively deeper dimensions of consciousness – to use a familiar typology, into the psychic, subtle, causal, and Absolute levels of experience³.

The essence of my revision of *Dark Night, Early Dawn*, then, is this. Rather than seeing the episodes of collective suffering reported there as a *protracted first-turning* of the wheel of death and rebirth, I now see them as a *second turning* of that wheel, one coming after the perinatal ego-death that had taken place previously and before the cycles of death-rebirth that followed in later sessions. They are the second movement of a larger symphony, a movement taking place at the subtle level of consciousness, a movement whose dynamics are inherently collective, focused on a collective patient and aimed at a collective transformation. This is a revision that Grof supports. In a personal exchange on this topic he wrote: "I feel that for clarity, we should change the terminology and make it clear that the term perinatal should be used only for fetal experiences...and not for experiences of death and rebirth on higher levels of the transpersonal spectrum with no relation to biological birth" (personal communication, October 25, 2006.)

While death may take many forms at different stages of the psychedelic journey, the core experience is always the same: complete surrender to whatever one is confronting, a loss of control and collapse of all reference points, and a

disorientation so deep that it dissolves reality as we have known it. Similarly, the essence of rebirth is consistent across levels: the experience of awakening inside a new and unanticipated dimension of existence, the birth of a new identity with new capacities, and the experience of absolute grace, of having been given infinitely more than one has given up. Within this basic structure, however, the details of dying and being reborn will reflect the specific level of consciousness at which one is working. The experiential texture of each death – its flavor, focus, and function – changes at different stages of initiation. I think that we may even say that *what* is dying and being reborn also changes. I will return to this point below.

While my early orientation valued psychedelic therapy for the contribution it might make to my spiritual liberation, eventually I came to recognize that much was taking place in my sessions that fell outside this narrow project. My sessions became a journey of cosmic discovery exploring what appeared to be the Creative Intelligence of the universe. This was a different track from enlightenment aimed at a different outcome – equally legitimate and equally if not more demanding to realize. One does not have to transcend time, be embraced by archetypal beings, or return to the birth of the cosmos in order to realize one's Essential Nature or rest in the transparent condition of *Śūnyatā* (emptiness). These are distinct if mutually reinforcing undertakings.

The transpersonal vistas that opened during the second phase of this journey compensated me generously for the time spent in the hell realms of collective suffering. They seemed to be focused on the psychic and subtle levels. There were many experiences of opening to what I came to call "deep time" – experiencing my life as a single whole from birth to death with insights into its core purpose and partners. There were also openings into the archetypal domain, making contact with collective structures that underpin life's diversity and being drawn into humanity's evolutionary future.

When the collective suffering eventually subsided and this second phase ended, I had a deep sense that I had accomplished my primary task in life, the core reason I had incarnated. This was followed by several overwhelmingly positive sessions in quick succession that seemed to constitute a mega-rebirth, a transition too large to fit into a single session. Together they constituted an initiation into orders of reality beyond any I had previously known. What little "I" was left could not have been happier. In the last chapter of *Dark*

Night, Early Dawn, I let session 38 represent this sequence, but it actually continued for five sessions.

Why does dying repeat itself so many times in psychedelic therapy?

At this point, I did not know what to expect. After all these years, I hoped that the ordeal of dying might stop. Sooner or later, I thought, the transition into transpersonal reality would stabilize and become easier. And it would have, I think, *had I stayed within the boundaries of the transpersonal territory I had been initiated into thus far*. For better or worse, however, the method of exploration I had adopted was so powerful that it kept pushing me beyond my experiential edges. Without fully realizing the consequences of what I was doing at the time, I kept stoking the fires of transformation and new vistas of reality kept opening. I did not appreciate then what I have come to understand now – that dying is part of an *endless* cycle of discovery and that it will keep returning as long as one keeps challenging the limits of one's experience. I had expected closure. What I received instead was initiation into the infinite depth of existence.

Over the next six years and 35 sessions, a third phase unfolded in which I was propelled through a series of initiatory experiences that drew me ever more deeply into an intelligence and power so vast I can only describe it using the vocabulary of the "Divine" even while the experiences themselves were demonstrating how limited and childlike our historical conceptions of the "Divine" have been. When this phase was over, I counted six cycles of death and rebirth. There were many deaths, of course, but six seminal breakthroughs.

This work had a rhythmic cadence to it, a systematic pulse of meltdown followed by initiation. I began to recognize that my system seemed to be accumulating and storing energy across multiple sessions. Initially I had thought that each session stood on its own energetically. I watched each session begin more or less where the previous session had ended, but I assumed that the energetic exertion of each session was separate and distinct from other sessions. Slowly, however, I began to realize there was a momentum building across my sessions. My system was somehow storing energy generated through multiple sessions and then releasing that energy in periodic breakthroughs of massive proportions. This was a sobering realization as it changed my calculation

of the true cost of each breakthrough. Each new initiation was being underwritten not by hours but by months and in some cases even years of work.

I came to dread the sessions immediately following these breakthroughs because they tended to involve intense "cleaning up" work. There was often a turgid "carrying out the garbage" quality to them. After observing this pattern many times, I began to understand that *deeper* states of consciousness are *higher* states of energy. Entering what can be described as a deeper level of reality shifts one into a higher energetic register, and this higher energy "shakes loose" debris in one's physical, subtle, and spiritual being. By debris I mean qualities, psychological patterns, and energetic constrictions that are incompatible with the purer energy one has entered. In my post-breakthrough sessions, my system seemed to strain to accommodate this purer energy, sweeping out the old to consolidate the new, eventually establishing a clearer and stronger energetic platform on which the next cycle of work would build. An analogy from mining comes to mind. After an explosion opens a new vein of ore deep in a mountain, you still have to carry away the rocks to get complete access to the gold.

It is difficult to describe the content of these late breakthroughs in a succinct way for several reasons. First, they require the context of sequence to give one's words meaning, as words carry different inflections at different levels of reality. Second, the experiences were often formless in nature and devoid of content as we know it, in contrast to the more imaged-filled experiences of subtle level reality. And third, many of the distinctions language assumes break down at these deep levels of reality. Differences between inner and outer, between "I" and "It" cease to hold. I can only speak in shorthand here.

After the collective purification ended, I was spun into the radiance of what, using Buddhist vocabulary, I perceived to be *Sambhogakāya*. I call it the domain of Diamond Luminosity. I had known light many times before but this was an exceptionally Pure Light. This domain captivated me so completely that it immediately extinguished any interest I had in continuing to explore the subtle levels of reality that had previously fascinated me. This was a different order of reality altogether. Its clarity was so overwhelming, its energy so pure that returning to it became my deepest agenda in future sessions⁴.

After my first initiation into the Diamond Luminosity, it took five sessions of intense purification before the doors opened again and I was returned to this reality, now experienced in a

slightly deeper and purer form. Then another cycle of *purification-unto-death* lasting about another year before again being drawn back into these Diamond Fields, experienced in a still deeper modality. It is the pattern of experience that is important to the point I want to make here – *that death and rebirth is a cycle that repeats itself at successive levels of experiential initiation.*

It was during this third phase that I learned that though we tend to think of death as an on/off phenomenon – you're either dead or you're not – there are in fact many *degrees of dying* in this work and the deepest breakthroughs tend to follow the deepest deaths. With this discovery, death became my closest ally in the work. What began as confronting my shadow morphed into a discipline of actively embracing death whatever form it might take. Instead of being something to be feared, death became something I actively sought out, repeatedly plunging myself into its purifying fire. I was not a glutton for pain; rather, I was a glutton for what lay on the other side of the pain.

Let me give one example to document this cycle of initiation, though by itself it will catch only one facet of this deepening spiral. The following pair of sessions constituted the first of the six initiatory cycles that took place during this third phase. I was 15 years into the journey and 45 years old. The entire first session was spent mining death while the second harvested the rebirth.

After a long introduction that yielded many insights into various family relationships, the theme of fear began to enter powerfully and tenaciously. I yielded and followed.

So much fear. Where was it coming from? What lay behind it? I had to work to keep open to it. Very few images came to give the fear any specific shape or form.

As things went on, I began to sense a fear of dying. Many variations on the fear of dying. I became people who were dying and they were afraid – afraid of the pain, of the unknown, of separation from loved ones. Fear and death intertwined in countless variations. A small part of me recognized the symptoms of engaging a collective COEX system, sensed that this was part of a death-rebirth cycle, but soon all this was swallowed by the specter of death. Dying swallowed even fear. Everything was death. Death and dying. I was dying. The parameters of this dying

exceeded anything I had previously known. How can dying reach such proportions?

Somewhere in here I realized that there were many degrees of dying. I had already died much through the years. Now I was being invited to die more. I could choose to die as much or as little as I wanted today.

I found myself suspended in a crystal of light. The bottom of the crystal was pointed and clear; the top was tinged with red and disappeared into radiating bands of shining light. My arms were stretched out from my body at 90 degrees in complete surrender, and I could choose how much I would die, how much I would allow myself to be dissolved into the light that was beaming through me. In the light, as light, infinite experience was possible. I could feel the extraordinary diversity of experience available to me as light. To surrender myself to this mode of experience would be to surrender all localized, individualized experience.

In this transfixed condition, I began to consciously choose death. I chose to open myself layer by layer to deeper currents of light. I could feel it reaching into me, changing me, transmuting me into something different. With my feet still frozen in the point of the crystal, my torso dissolved into pure light. I moved in light. I was light. It was joyous, a completely different world, a completely different reality.

After a relatively brief period of time in this reality, I was returned to the currents of fear. I cannot say what directed me back there or why. Fear was simply present again, and so once again I dove into it, seeking to get to its core.

This time the fear was many times greater than before. It had many more layers to it, many more variations. Fragments from my present life swirled in symphony with fragments from former lives and lives that seemed drawn from the collective psyche.

From one perspective, I was melting a collective COEX system, a Meta-Matrix of fear; from another perspective I was engaged in shamanic combat with demons of fear. But what strange combat this was. Here one "conquers" by surrendering, by becoming vulnerable to what surrounds you. I kept holding still and opening, taking into myself whatever presented itself to my

experience, opening to wave after wave of fear, always searching for some sign of its origin but finding none.

Then something shifted. In the midst of the collective mayhem, a more personal theme arose. Fear merged with a feeling of helplessness. I was suffering, dying, and reaching out. Old memories surfaced from what appeared to be a previous life as a soldier dying on a battlefield after the battle had ended. "Help me!" I cried, but no one came. I died alone. My mother entered my awareness and I recognized layers that derived from my early experience as an infant and child in her home. A soldier's dying gasp blended with an infant's helplessness. No comrades, no mother, no help. The core of my fear was helplessness. Somewhere in history death, helplessness, aloneness, and fear had fused. Now the pieces were coming out and separating.

I stayed with these experiences for a long time. They played and played for hours of clock time and centuries of session time. After giving up all hope of ever reaching the bottom of them, they finally and nondramatically released me. Something had played itself out and I was free.

It was late in the session and I was bone-weary tired. As I began to move about mentally, I found myself in a world shimmering around the edges with light, but I was too exhausted and it was too late in the day to do more than briefly touch the edges of this domain. (Session 44)

(One month later.)

Today is a day I have waited many years for. How can I express the gratitude I feel for every person and circumstance that made today possible? How can I say thank you enough?

After a long period of opening, I found myself repeatedly saying, "I have earned the right to die." Far from fearing death, I was seeking it out, demanding that it come to me. I was deflecting half-measures and insisting on my right to a complete and final death. I had done my work; I had earned the right to die, and I was calling on this right. My litany focused me and carried me deeper and deeper until I reach a point of complete concentration.

From this position of absolute focus, I began to die. Oh, what sweet death! I began to savor what was happening! What I

had previously feared now opened to me as incredible sweetness. How wonderful to experience death! What a surprising reversal! Thank you, thank you.

Upon dying I moved into an ecstatic mode of experience I cannot describe adequately. It was a different mode of experience from anything I had known in previous sessions; the entire flow of the experience was different. Light-filled, yes; a universe composed of nothing but light. What stood out for me, however, was something I cannot articulate well.

It was as if I had moved inside the inner flow of God's being, as if my life was now bending and flowing through a being of infinite dimensions. There was nothing amorphous or fuzzy about the experience; on the contrary, it was extraordinarily clear and precise. The boundaries of this clarity exceeded anything I had previously known.

Apparently, one death was not enough in my case. I found myself standing in the middle of a circle, surrounded by a swiftly spinning band of holographic images of my life. All the time-moments of my life were present in this circle. Everything I had ever thought, felt, and done. I fell into the circle and experienced some part of my life, but as I did it suddenly "died out from under me" and I instantly found myself in the luminous death-state beyond individual identity. Then I was returned to the center of the circle and the process repeated itself, now falling in a different direction and touching a different part of my life. This was repeated many times as if to drive the point home, as if to say, "See, whatever direction you turn, there is only death. Death in all Directions." It was teaching me that in this transition, the outer form of one's life may remain, but the inner substance is the Light itself.

The repetition kept expanding the scope of the transition, taking me deeper and deeper into ecstasy until eventually there was no center to return to, only the pure, seamless condition of the death-state. What strange language to describe our true nature.

The death-state.

Incredibly clear.

Luminous beyond measure.

Incredible age; incredible extension.

*A seamless intelligence running not
above but inside existence.
Pieces of reaching out and moving
into large "wholes" of experience.
Blocks of experience encompassing
thousands, millions of people.
Human-experience folded into
Earth-experience.
Just touches, tastes.
Ecstatic reverence for the integrated
movement of life
throughout the universe.*

*For several hours I was carried
along the currents of this condition about
which one says either too little or too much.
The price of saying nothing is to risk
forgetting the subtler textures of the
experience, yet to speak creates the illusion
that words are adequate to the task and they
are not. Even after fifteen years, today was
so unlike any previous mode of experience
that language truly fails me. Silent
appreciation seems the best recourse,
combined with ceaseless prayers of
thanksgiving. My song springs forth from my
heart.*

*How can something so crystal clear,
so devoid of earthly form evoke tears of
homecoming?
What are we that such imprisoned splendor,
once released, floods us with rivers of
gratitude?
Whom shall we thank for what we are?
Where do I direct my deep appreciation?
There is no one place,
so I send my prayer into the seamless fabric
of existence
left and right, high and low,
in infinite dimensions all around.
My attempts to describe the experience keep
breaking down,
and I end up repeating the same words over
and over.
I was home
...and free
...and Light.*

(Session 45)

As complete as this rebirth was, it was in time followed by more experiences of dying as the spiral of initiation continued to turn. My understanding of this pattern is that death repeats itself not because it has failed to hit its mark and something of ego survives but because the Divine

is an infinite landscape with countless levels to explore. As our transpersonal experience deepens and refines itself, one undergoes many deaths, for each death is but a gateway to what lies beyond. Levels of reality that we are born *into* at one stage we are later challenged to die *out of*. Dying out of humanity, dying out of space-time, dying out of the *bardo* echoes of space-time, dying out of the archetypal flux.

After one has died and been reborn many times, eventually the very concept of death begins to lose its meaning. One learns through repetition that at the deepest level of one's being, it is impossible to die. The form that one is can be shattered, one's entire reality can be repeatedly destroyed, but one's innermost essence always reemerges. The phoenix always rises. *Death becomes simply a measure of the degree of purification being enacted.* When purification reaches burn-through proportions, when it reaches so deeply that it begins to dissolve the form that you are, then dying has returned to grace you.

It was during this third phase that I surrendered one more assumption about death and rebirth – the assumption that there is an ultimate end to this cycle, a final death. I no longer believe this is the case. The dying stops when one's capacity for discovery is simply exhausted and one can take no more.

Let me qualify this carefully. When one's private existence is dissolved, one can enter a state of Oneness that is completely and utterly satisfying. One rests in the source of existence, one with all that is. You cannot imagine anything more complete. And yet my experience has been that with repeated immersion in this condition, new dimensions of the Oneness eventually reveal themselves, with new levels of joy associated with each. The One exists in many modalities and therefore can be known in many modalities, always One but in different depths of expression. I must strain language to make the point.

It was not theory that changed my thinking on this but experience. First, it was simply the fact that, in my case at least, dying always returned no matter how complete or soul-satisfying earlier rebirths had been. As long as I was willing to return to the fire, the universe was willing to take me deeper, until eventually I simply could no longer endure the energetic consequences of the exercise. And second, one particular session showed me that no matter how deeply one enters the Divine, there are always deeper dimensions still. The following excerpt is taken from a session that came five sessions after the session cited

above, at the end of my second initiation into the Diamond Luminosity.

It had been a particularly rich day. I was resting in a state of super-luminosity far beyond space-time, completely at peace and one with the Light, when the following occurred:

Suddenly everything pivoted 90 degrees, and a huge gap opened to reveal entire worlds beyond the world I was in. They looked something like magnificently beautiful distant galaxies floating in space, and shining through them was the most sublime, exquisite, Absolute Light. This Absolute Light was "beyond" even the Diamond Luminosity where I presently was, an exponential increase in clarity. The rays of this Absolute Light hit me, completely transfixing me and leaving me utterly stunned in rapture. Such splendor! In only seconds it completely redefined my life's agenda. The progressive realization is endless. Any cost, any cost! (Session 50).

What is dying and being reborn in this transformational process?

This brings me to the third and final question: What is actually dying and being reborn in this spiral of death and rebirth? In attempting to answer this question I want to affirm a delicate both/and balance. On the one hand, I want to affirm the position of the individual. The individual registers and absorbs these successive deaths. They become part of his or her life story, and so they "belong" to the individual in ways that I do not want to negate or deny. On the other hand, I think these deaths also "belong" to the Universe in ways that transcend the individual. They are something *It* is doing. The Universe appears to use these opportunities to heal *Itself* and commune with *Itself* in ways that reach beyond the individual. I think both these perspectives are important and true. With this said, let me suggest four overlapping answers to the question of what is dying and being reborn in this deepening transformational spiral.

The ego

In the early stages of the journey, what is dying is our body-mind identity, the small self, ego. More specifically, what is dying are the constrictions and wounds, the illusions and habits created by our earthly history. But in later sessions

after ego has surrendered its grip on our consciousness, what exactly is dying then? There is often an acute sensation of dying in these subsequent sessions, but what exactly does this sensation attach to?

The species ego

As argued in *Dark Night, Early Dawn*, when the wheel of death and rebirth is turning at the subtle level of reality and the deaths are largely collective, what is dying, I believe, is *some part of the species ego*, that is, some collective nodule of ignorance and pain inside the collective unconscious of our species. If the patient in these sessions expands from the personal psyche to the collective psyche, then what is being reborn is some aspect of our collective mind. Though we may participate in these events, what "we" are has shifted. We participate less as an individual and more *as a member of our species* or even *as the entire species itself*.

The pulse of the life one is living in these hours is not our private life but the pulse of human history. The COEX systems that are resolving themselves in these exercises are not personal complexes but Meta-Matrices within the collective unconsciousness (Bache, 2000). The intelligence that initiates and guides this collective rebirth is not the individual's "higher self" but something like the "higher self of the human species," the archetypal intelligence that connects our species consciousness to the Creative Intelligence of the universe⁵.

The shamanic persona

A third part of the answer to the question of what is dying in post ego-death sessions may be found in what I call the *shamanic persona*.

I think all journeyers have had the experience that after a session has ended, we sometimes cannot consciously retain all the experiences, knowledge, and insights that we had during the session. And yet when we reenter psychedelic space in subsequent sessions, this "missing" knowledge is present once again, waiting for us. As a session opens, we often have a sense of resuming our "psychedelic identity," an identity that is familiar to us and deeper than our egoic identity. This common experience suggests that the psyche remembers and integrates our psychedelic experiences at levels deeper than egoic consciousness.

Ego-state psychology has demonstrated that this compartmentalizing of experience is

actually a common feature of our psychological makeup. Many areas of our inner life have this encapsulated, semi-autonomous quality⁶. I think that this psychology may throw an interesting light on how the psyche manages the extreme swings of awareness generated in psychedelic therapy, with one proviso. Ego-state psychology tends to see ego-states as created in reaction to trauma. Here the shamanic persona is born from a surplus of blessings.

I want to suggest that in the repeated opening and closing of awareness, a *semi-autonomous, state-specific consciousness* is formed that retains and integrates those psychedelic experiences that the egoic self cannot hold on to. This consciousness not only remembers our experiences, it preserves the knowledge and capacities we acquired in them. I call this psychedelically-generated entity *the shamanic persona*. The shamanic persona can be thought of as a state-specific alter ego. In calling this entity the shamanic *persona*, I am not suggesting that it has a “masking” function but am drawing attention to the fact that it changes as experience deepens. If one prefers, one may call it the *shamanic identity* or *shamanic self*.

The more experience one has accumulated at a given level of transpersonal reality, the stronger the shamanic persona will be at that level. If one’s psychedelic experience has been chaotic and fragmented there, the persona will be weaker. If one’s experience has been well focused and clear, the persona will be stronger and more stable. The more successfully we have integrated our psychedelic experiences into our conscious awareness, the “closer” and more familiar our shamanic persona will likely feel to our ordinary sense of self. Conversely, the less well integrated our experiences have been – either because of poor session management or because the content of a session was particularly deep – the more “distant” and “other” the shamanic persona will feel⁷.

Because the shamanic persona is a synthesis of a specific set of experiences, it is a specific entity with a specific identity. It is the living memory of our psychedelic history, and as such it has built into it the limits of that history. A shamanic persona that embodies stabilized psychic level transpersonal experience, for example, is a very different entity than a shamanic persona embodying stabilized subtle level experience. By “stabilized experience” I mean that we have entered a specific level of consciousness often enough that we have acclimated to the territory and learned the terrain. Our psycho-physical system has undergone the necessary purifications and

adaptations for us to maintain coherent awareness and good recall at this level.

If this line of thought has merit, it may give us a new layer to the answer to the question what is dying in these sessions? When one’s system begins to open to levels of transpersonal reality that are deeper than levels we had previously experienced, our earlier psychedelic experience must itself yield to this new territory. Our previous psychedelic knowledge *and the identity based on that knowledge* must surrender control before a still deeper mode of transpersonal awareness can fully emerge. In essence, then, what I think is sometimes dying in these openings is the shamanic persona – the living memory of one’s psychedelic experience. Though its surrender may feel like a personal death, it is not the ego that is dying here but a deeper sense of identity that has been birthed *inside* one’s previous sessions. Like all identities in our fluid world, the shamanic persona is a working construct and like all constructs, it has limitations that must be transcended if consciousness is to continue to open to new depths.

In a sustained psychedelic regimen, one’s shamanic persona may die and be reborn multiple times. After one’s first shamanic persona dies and one’s experience becomes stabilized at a deeper level of transpersonal consciousness, a new shamanic persona emerges to hold and integrate these new experiences, or to put it more precisely, it emerges *as* the living integration of these experiences. This second persona will retain the memories and knowledge of the previous persona but will now add to them new knowledge and new capacities. Down the road when a still deeper dimension of reality opens, this second shamanic persona will in turn have to surrender in order for this deeper modality of experience to become fully operational.

A dimension of the cosmos

Let me suggest a fourth answer to the question of what is dying in this spiral of death and rebirth, eclipsing even the shamanic persona.

Using the vocabulary of psychic, subtle, and causal levels of experience, the threads that make up the shamanic persona at the psychic level of transpersonal experience will be personal or soul-centered in nature. At the low subtle level where collective patterns begin to predominate, the threads become increasingly collective and species-wide. At higher subtle levels where the currents of experience are more archetypal and deity-related, the threads become correspondingly

archetypal. If we continue this progression into causal levels of reality, eventually the threads become so universal in scope that I think the category of shamanic persona becomes less useful to describe what is actually dying in these meltdowns. For me, the category of shamanic persona is always tinged with personhood; it is an extension and deepening of my individual identity. As such, it is too small an entity to adequately describe the experiential quality of these later deaths, at least as I have experienced them. Clearly we're marking stages on a continuum here, but eventually it feels more accurate to let the category of the shamanic persona go and try to conceptualize these combustive implosions from within a still larger frame of reference.

The same can be said for the species ego. As broad a reality as the species ego is, it is a human-centric phenomenon. In the context of the vast cosmos, it is a comparatively small thing. Sooner or later, transpersonal experience outgrows these anthropic proportions and we must look for still larger explanations of what is "dying" in advanced sessions. But here the clear road runs out and things become more uncertain. At this point I can only share intuitions I've formed over the years, and these intuitions are tentative and incomplete.

How does one describe the larger arc of life that sparks in these deeper meltdowns? How much can we truly know about the function these meta-deaths may serve in the deeper web of life? What need do such deep levels of reality have of "rebirth" at all? I do not know the final balancing of these accounts, but I believe we should begin by viewing everything that takes place in deep psychedelic work from the perspective of the Great Chain of Being as a whole.

Let me begin by sharing an observation I made in the closing pages of *Dark Night, Early Dawn*:

To use Ken Wilber's vocabulary, if we are a holon functioning as a part within a series of ever-enlarging wholes, then the death-rebirth dynamic may have different functions for different levels of reality, all of which are being realized simultaneously. From the perspective of the smaller holon, for example, the effect of death-rebirth may be liberation into that which is larger, while the effect of the same transition from the perspective of the larger holon may be to allow it greater access to and integration with the smaller field. An event that functions as spiritual

"ascent" from below may simultaneously function as "descent" from above (Bache, 2000: 298).

This observation invites us to think about the dynamics of death and rebirth more multi-dimensionally. It is a process observation that generalizes across multiple levels of reality. At the subtle level of consciousness, for example, death and rebirth may open a portal that serves not only to drain destructive energies *out of* the species mind but also to infuse healing energies *into* the species mind from a higher source (Bache, 2000: Appendix B). At still deeper levels, such portals may allow any number of transcendental blessings to be infused directly into "lower" orders of existence. The question then becomes: How does the addition of this principle of *infusion-from-above* influence the question of how we might conceptualize what is dying and being born at these deep levels of psychedelic experience?

From my perspective, Sri Aurobindo's involutory/evolutionary cosmology resonates deeply with the cosmological vision that emerges in psychedelic states (Grof, 1998; Weiss, 2012), so let me draw upon it here. According to Sri Aurobindo (Aurobindo, 1970; Satprem, 1993), in the cascading involution of the Divine many levels of existence are manifested. While these levels may be porous from "above," they are less porous from "below." Like looking through a series of one-way mirrors, the Divine looking "down" sees everything It has become, but lower levels (also of the Divine) looking "up" see less. When we who are below manage by labor or by grace to access some of these higher levels, a special magic sometimes takes place.

Assume for the moment that through the fiery exercises of psychedelic therapy we have managed to stabilize experience at the high subtle level of reality. In order to reach this level, what "we" are has changed. No longer our individual selves, "we" have temporarily become some aspect of subtle level reality. During our sessions we live as a life form that breathes this rarified air. When through further exercises a doorway opens to still deeper causal levels of reality, it appears to allow a *cosmic communion* to take place between the subtle and causal realms. Deep communes with Deep. Bringing different levels of spiritual reality into conscious communion with each other, even if for only a few hours, seems to nourish and bring joy to the weave of existence as the "below" remembers the "above" and the blessings of "above" pour more freely into the "below." What is taking place is a Cosmic Dance between deep

levels of the Divine Fabric of existence. It is God communing with God, nourishing Its self-manifesting, self-emergent being in ways we may glimpse but perhaps never fully comprehend.

What dies and is reborn, then, in these later cycles of death and rebirth? Beyond the ego, beyond the species mind, beyond the shamanic persona, I think what “dies” is something of truly cosmic proportions. Something deep in the fabric of the universe surrenders and in surrendering is nourished from above. Some dimension of being extraordinarily vast awakens more completely to Itself. And much to our surprise, the Divine appears to genuinely appreciate our collaboration in facilitating this communion.

Conclusions

This autobiographical study has attempted to chart some of the dynamics of death and rebirth in high dose LSD therapy that take place beyond ego-death, identifying features of the psychedelic process that tend not to arise within a patient-centered narrative. Looking at LSD therapy from the perspective of an expanded narrative, it has proposed: (1) that death-rebirth is a spiral that repeats itself many times at deeper stages of psychedelic initiation, (2) that at the subtle level of consciousness the “patient” can shift from being the individual to being the species mind as a whole, and (3) that at still deeper levels of consciousness what is “dying” is a state-specific psychedelic alter-ego I have called the shamanic persona, and subsequently perhaps even something of cosmic proportions as the Divine enters more deeply into communion with itself. Looking at psychedelic therapy from this broader perspective allows an account to emerge that is more self-consistent with the core insights of transpersonal psychology into our multi-dimensional universe.

Notes

¹ See Myron Stolaroff’s wise and seasoned essay (1999). Criticizing a number of assertions made about psychedelics made in *Zig Zag Zen* (2002), Stolaroff discusses the advantages of integrating low doses of LSD (25-50 micrograms) into one’s contemplative practice.

² In Grof’s model, the perinatal domain is a level of consciousness that lies between the personal level of consciousness and transpersonal levels of consciousness. As the doorway between physical and spiritual reality, it

combines birth, death, and rebirth in complex combinations, for birth and death are the revolving door between these two worlds. Entering this level of consciousness frequently involves facing one’s death while simultaneously reliving one’s birth, confronting the deepest existential questions about the meaning of existence and experiencing intense *kriyas* – physical and emotional purifications. It often blends personal and collective elements, sometimes drawing one into fields of collective anguish that exist in the collective unconscious. It culminates in the complete collapse of one’s physical identity – ego-death – and rebirth into spiritual reality.

³ Ken Wilber developed this typology, derived largely from Hindu and Buddhist sources, to describe different stages of spiritual development (1980: Chapters 8-9). He later used Emerson to represent the psychic level, Teresa of Avila the subtle, and Eckhart and Sri Ramana Maharshi to represent the combined causal and Absolute (nondual) levels (1995: Chapter 8). Grof discusses Wilber’s typology in several places but most fully in *The Future of Psychology* (2000: 65-68) where he uses these categories to describe not stages of spiritual development but states of consciousness that arise in psychedelic and holotropic settings.

⁴ Wilber associates light with subtle level experience (1995: 622), but I think this fails to recognize the many gradations of light that actually surface in transpersonal experience. I would classify the “Diamond Luminosity” I am describing as a causal level phenomenon.

⁵ I apologize for the human-centered focus of addressing the human species mind while seeming to ignore the larger landscape of life. This reflects the idiosyncratic focus of my personal work, which seems to have targeted our species as the primary threat to our planet. A more comprehensive account of the mental fields of our planet would include categories such as the minds of other species, the mammalian mind, the Gaian mind, the galactic mind, and so on.

⁶ Rowan defines ego-states as “semi-permanent and semi-autonomous regions of the personality capable of acting as persons” (1990: 8). For an excellent discussion of ego-states see Zinser (2011). See also Emmerson (2007), and Watkins (1987).

⁷ I am oversimplifying matters here to speak as though there is only one shamanic persona in existence at any given time. Perhaps this is true, but perhaps there are multiple shamanic personas existing at one time, each integrating a specific layer of our psychedelic experience. This diversity would require a more nuanced presentation. We might have to shift to thinking in terms of “clusters” of shamanic personas. I don’t think this adjustment, however, would change the fundamental recommendation I’m making here concerning the role of the shamanic persona in death and rebirth.

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