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# Near-Death Experience and the Mystic Path

Felicia Ryan

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## ABSTRACT

Mukerjee believes that mystical experiences are characterized by feelings of unbounded joy, self-affirmation, self-transcendence, and the mind being free. While these characteristics are not extremely common in our society, certain events may trigger these unfamiliar feelings. Mukerjee's review of paths to mystical experiences did not identify an experience such as near-death. Therefore this study examines four specific characteristics of mystical experiences defined by Mukerjee and looks for these characteristics in documentary evidence of people's accounts of near-death experiences. The study found that near-death experiences, like other mystic experiences, are characterized by unbounded joy, self-affirmation, self-transcendence, and the mind being free.

## INTRODUCTION

In our society, nonordinary experiences are not understood with an open mind. Mystical (or nonordinary) experiences are characterized by scholars as having ineffability, passivity, transient and noetic qualities, and a feeling of unity. Mukerjee (1960) believes that sociology can contribute to the weakening of boundaries that suppress unity. The unity in nonordinary experiences can lead to a greater social life and a greater understanding of mystical experiences themselves, thereby enhancing the sociological field.

Throughout the preface of *Theory of Art and Mysticism*, Mukerjee (1960) describes mystical experiences as consisting of characteristics of unbounded joy, self-affirmation, self-transcendence, and the mind being free. Many of these feelings may not be deeply engrained in our cultural society, but can be experienced and seen in everyday life by those who take the time to understand them. People have the ability to partake in mystical types of experiences in their everyday lives, whether it occurs during their yoga class or as a result of a traumatic experience. Triggers of such insight is a subject of debate among scholars. Mukerjee speaks of triggers like starvation, isolation, drug use, hypnosis, elimination of pain, or intense pleasures. Other scholars, like Andrew M. Greeley (1975), include triggers like listening to music, prayer, looking at natural beauty in nature or artwork, quiet reflection, sex, psychedelic drugs, exercise, and many other triggers associated with church. Yet while these

triggers have been studied extensively, there are many gaps in the research of mystical experiences. One gap includes looking into the mystical experiences of people who claim to have had visions of the afterlife, which were induced by near-death experiences. The major mystical mindset this study will focus on is one due to having a near-death experience.

Do people who have had a near-death experience claim similar occurrences to that of mystical experiences as described by Mukerjee? Through the study of documentary evidence, this study will analyze the personal accounts of people's near-death experience through analyzing in-depth interviews in the book *Life After Life* by Raymond Moody. This research could potentially lead to a greater understanding and development of both near-death and mystical experiences.

## CONNECTION TO LITERATURE

Mukerjee (1960) characterized mystical experience through various qualities he found in his research. He defined mysticism as "the art of inner adjustment by which [a human] apprehends the universe as whole instead of its particular parts" (Mukerjee, 1960, p. xii). What Mukerjee considered products of inner adjustment were the characteristics of unbounded joy, self-affirmation, self-transcendence, and the mind being free. Though he characterized more qualities, I would like to focus my attention on



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studying near-death experience through the lens of these four characteristics of mystical experience.

The first product of inner adjustment that Mukerjee (1960) characterized was the feeling of unbounded joy. The understanding of oneself as both an individual and as part of a greater whole leads people to feel a sense of joy without boundary. In figuring out oneself, one feels both unity and joy. As Mukerjee stated, “The dialectic of the self moves on from the experience of continuum to that of an undivided Unity or of the world as unbounded Joy” (p. xii). This inner adjustment of a mystical experience recognizes the universe as whole and when seen as whole, it also appears limitless. So, without boundaries, the feeling of joy is endless in mystical experience.

The next two products of inner adjustment Mukerjee (1960) characterized were self-affirmation and self-transcendence. A mystical anxiety about reality supposedly occurs in identifying a person’s own consciousness. This accepting of consciousness is what gives an overpowering sense of unity of being through understanding yourself, or as Mukerjee stated, “the participation in the being of others becomes nothing less than the secret of self-affirmation and self-transcendence involved in knowing oneself” (p. xv). In comprehending the universe as a whole, one must affirm their own being. Accepting unity with oneself and the world is where a person must recognize and affirm themselves as valuable individuals in order to participate in this greater whole. Along with self-affirmation, self-transcendence is involved in this process as well. Mukerjee referenced self-transcendence throughout his work, stating that “unlike the [human] of science the mystic’s highest effort is an effortless turning inward...by which [s/he] identifies [him/herself] with the wholeness of the universe, transcending time and life,” (p. xvi) showing that the highest effort is made without effort. Once one is able to analyze the experience one had, one would have to understand oneself outside the context of time and being in order to fully accept that one had a mystical experience. Then one would be able to understand this deeper unity with the world.

The final product of inner adjustment in a mystical experience is the feeling of a free mind. Mukerjee (1960) notes that “the mind is freed not only from all feelings, including religious or moral sentiments, but

also from all notions and concepts,” (p. xvii) meaning that people who have had visions of the afterlife become free of previous ties to religious beliefs and have a clean slate of new joy through their mystical experience. Therefore they are open to a new experience that they feel to be both real and effortless.

## METHODOLOGY

This study will start by looking at written traces of phenomena, or documentary evidence, of people who have had a near-death experience. I would like to focus on one book by Raymond Moody entitled *Life After Life*, where 100 people were interviewed after they were revived from being clinically dead. Moody’s interviews were kept anonymous and therefore no names nor, at times, gender descriptors were presented in introducing information used to describe a near-death experience. The study will focus on whether the experiences were described with a more emotionally descriptive vocabulary, concentrating on the four characteristics that Mukerjee described as unbounded joy, self-affirmation, self-transcendence, and the mind being free. For unbounded joy, the study will see if the person highlights a limitless sense of happiness, joy, bliss, delight, ecstasy, etc. For self-affirmation, this study will see if the person asserted strongly that what they felt was right, true, genuine, or factual. For self-transcendence, the study will look to see if the person’s near-death experience was beyond a normal and physical realm of being. Then the study will look to find if the person said phrases similar to, “It was nothing like I have ever experienced before,” or “It was out of this world.” Lastly, for looking at the mind being free, this study will seek out feelings of clarity from the person or belief that their judgment was free from internal questioning. I will use these four preliminaries as a base to be able to fully interpret the person’s descriptions of their near-death experience. After collecting data, this exploration aims to contribute to a better understanding of near-death experiences and how they fit into Mukerjee’s mysticism.

## FINDINGS

Near-death experience provided feelings of unbounded joy. The first person described their own experience in which they saw deceased family members like so: “It seems that I mainly saw their faces and felt

their presence. They all seemed pleased. It was a very happy occasion, and I felt that they had come to protect or to guide me” (Moody, 1975/2001, p. 50). The next person focused even more on the euphoria of their experience: “I enjoyed going through this flashback. That was fun. I had a good time going back to my childhood, almost like I was reliving it. It was a way of going back and seeing it which you ordinarily just can’t do” (Moody, 1975/2001, p. 62). As another person described, “I approached [the mist] more closely, I felt certain that I was going through that mist. It was such a wonderful, joyous feeling; there are just no words in the human language to describe it” (Moody, 1975/2001, p. 72). The “mist” this person was talking about was the line he described between visions of him and his deceased family members. He found joy in his near-death experience when he began to be with his family members who had already passed away. The last person, in the throes of their experience, believed that “the doctor had already said that I was gone, but I lived through it. Yet the experience I had been through was so joyous, I had no bad feelings at all” (Moody, 1975/2001, p. 74). This person had a more general feeling of joy based on his whole mystical experience. Each of these quotes is an account of joy using descriptions like wonderful, enjoyment, happy, joyous, etc. What they have in common with one another is that this type of happiness was used to describe their visions of past experiences. Whether it was in visions of their youth or visions of their loved ones through a near-death experience, they each felt a sense of joy. They understood themselves and their visions allowed them to be happy in context of being whole with their past experiences. The sense of joy did not seem to be described explicitly without boundary, like Mukerjee (1960) characterized, but the joy in understanding oneself through a near-death experience is seen in these people’s near-death experiences.

Near-death experiences also had a sense of self-affirmation. The first person claimed that “while I was out of my body, I was really amazed at what was happening to me. I couldn’t understand it. But it was real” (Moody, 1975/2001, p. 77). When speaking about their near-death experience they described themselves as being out of their physical body, and while they could not make full sense of it they un-

derstood it as a real experience. The next person described their experience as:

Nothing like an hallucination. I have had hallucinations once, when I was given codeine in the hospital. But that had happened long before the accident which really killed me. And this experience was nothing like the hallucinations, nothing like them at all. (Moody, 1975/2001, p. 78)

This person was defending their experience as something real—not as something people would normally dismiss as a hallucination. They even compared it back to when they truly did hallucinate, and understood their near-death experience as more than that. Lastly, as another person claimed:

I didn’t tell anyone about it for a long, long time. I just didn’t say anything at all about it. I felt funny about it because I was afraid that nobody would think I was telling the truth, that they would say, “Oh, you’re making up these things.” (Moody, 1975/2001, p. 79)

This person was nervous to tell others about their near-death experience because they were afraid of what those others might think. They did not want someone to say that they were making things up, because in their mind they were telling a true account of something that was real to them. Each of these accounts is self-affirming in that the participants strongly asserted that what they felt was right, true, genuine, or factual. They were not describing their experience as something like a dream but as an actual experience. They recognized their own experiential value and did not want other people to tell them what they faced or did not face—they knew that their near-death experience was genuine. While there was no interpretation of comprehending the universe as a whole like in Mukerjee’s (1960) understanding of self-affirmation, each of these people did support their own being by affirming themselves as a valuable individual who understood their near-death experience as true.

Near-death experiences also had qualities of self-transcendence. The first person stated, “I had a floating sensation as I felt myself get out of my body,

and—I looked back and could see myself on the bed below and there was no fear” (Moody, 1975/2001, p. 34). This person had an experience they described as out of the physical realm of being, where they felt and could see themselves out of their body. The next person claimed that

I kind of lost my sense of time, and I lost my physical reality as far as my body is concerned—I lost touch with my body. My being or my self or my spirit, or whatever you would like to label it—I could sort of feel it rise out of me, out through my head. (Moody, 1975/2001, p. 43)

This person lost their sense of all reality and that of the physical and normal realm of being. As another person described, “my being had no physical characteristics, but I have to describe it with physical terms. I could describe it in so many ways, in so many words, but none of them would be exactly right. It’s so hard to describe” (Moody, 1975/2001, p. 44). This person had a difficult time describing what they felt in their near-death experience, but they were beyond any physical being. The last person stated that “I have been somewhere nobody else has ever been” (Moody, 1975/2001, p. 81). This person believed that they went somewhere that no one had ever experienced before and were therefore out of reality. All of these accounts showed that these people transcended their own lives and understood themselves out of the context of physical being. Unlike Mukerjee’s (1960) idea of self-transcendence, none of these people claimed a deeper unity with the world, although their conception of overcoming the limits of their individual being were clearly outlined.

Near-death experiences showed characteristics of the mind being free. One person described their near-death experience simply like this: “I just had a nice, great feeling of solitude and peace...It was beautiful, and I was at such peace in my mind” (Moody, 1975/2001, p. 26). This type of peace of mind showed some sort of freedom of mental thought. Another person described this peace of mind as a “darkness was so deep and impenetrable that I could see absolutely nothing but this was the most wonderful, worry free

experience you can imagine” (Moody, 1975/2001, p. 30). This appears to show that while the person’s mind was stimulated by darkness, they were worry-free, which showed a sense of freedom in their mind. Lastly, as a person described, “things that are not possible now, are then. Your mind is so clear. It’s so nice” (Moody, 1975/2001, p. 46). This person described their mind being clear during their near-death experience as compared to when they were back in reality. All of these accounts showed feelings of clarity and freedom from terrestrial concepts. While this clarity was engrained in Mukerjee’s conception of the mind being free, it did not as described include any feelings of freedom from religious or moral feelings as well. The people did have this sense of a free mind that was at peace with itself and their being.

## CONCLUSION

The purpose of this research was to address the question of near-death experiences having similar characteristics of mystical experiences as described by Mukerjee (1960). The study focused on the characteristics Mukerjee described as unbounded joy, self-affirmation, self-transcendence, and the mind being free. What was found through this research of documentary evidence was that near-death experiences did consist of the qualities of unbounded joy, self-affirmation, self-transcendence, and the mind being free. The conclusion drawn from this collection of data showed that near-death experiences can be categorized as mystical experiences. Though further research would need to be done to further prove and elaborate on these findings, the content of this research shows that near-death experience and mystical experience tend to have similar characteristics.

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