

Exploring the Near-Death Experience:

## An Interview with Charles Tart, Ph.D.

By David Jay Brown

**Charles Tart, Ph.D.** is a psychologist and parapsychological researcher. He is best known as one of the founders of the field of transpersonal psychology, for his psychological work on the nature of consciousness—particularly altered states of consciousness—and for his scientific research into psychic phenomena.

Tart earned his Ph.D. in psychology from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 1963. His books *Altered States of Consciousness* and *Transpersonal Psychologies* have been widely used as academic texts, and they were instrumental in allowing these areas to become part of modern psychology. Some of Tart's other popular books include *States of Consciousness*, *On Being Stoned: A Psychological Study of Marijuana Intoxication*, and *Mind Science: Meditation Training for Practical People*.

Tart's most recent book *The End of Materialism: How Evidence of the Paranormal is Bringing Science and Spirit Together* is the best book that I've read about integrating science and spirituality. Tart clearly and patiently demonstrates precisely how new scientific evidence is breaking down outdated paradigms, and he believes that the scientific evidence for psychic phenomena is helping to bring science and spirit back together. He says that his "primary goal is to build bridges between the scientific and spiritual communities and to help bring about a refinement and integration of Western and Eastern approaches for knowing the world and for personal and social growth."

Tart is currently a Core Faculty Member at the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology, a Senior Research Fellow of the Institute of Noetic Sciences, emeritus member of the Monroe Institute board of advisors, and Professor Emeritus of Psychology at the University of California, Davis, where he has served for 28 years. To find out more about Tart's work, see: [www.paradigm-sys.com](http://www.paradigm-sys.com)



Charles T. Tart, Ph.D.  
[cttart@ucdavis.edu](mailto:cttart@ucdavis.edu)

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I interviewed Charles on December 16, 2009. Charles is a very eloquent speaker, and he talks about anomalous phenomena with great precision. We spoke about near-death experiences, out-of-body experiences, and how psychedelic experiences and other altered states of consciousness are similar to and different from a typical near-death experience.

**David: How did you become interested in studying altered states of consciousness?**

Charles: I think that part of it was just curiosity. Ever since I was a child I've wondered how my mind worked.

**David: Can you describe what a near-death experience is commonly like?**

Charles: I can always refer to people Raymond Moody's list of fifteen characteristics that are important in every near-death experience (NDE). But to sum it up in a shorter fashion than that, it happens like this. You think that you're dying. There are periods of unconsciousness, and commonly—but not universally—you find yourself floating up above your body, which may be in an operating room. You go through the very powerful psychological shock of hearing your doctor pronounce you dead. That's quite a heavy psychological proclamation. (*Laughter*) Then, if the experience develops further, I'd call it an out-of-body experience (OBE), because during an OBE you're fully conscious. Then the NDE goes on to become an altered state of consciousness, not just a feeling of being outside your body. Now, of course, in real life there are times when it's hard to decide whether an experience is a NDE or just an OBE, but those are the ideal cases.

**David: I thought that an OBE usually implied an altered state of consciousness.**

Charles: No, the typical thing about an OBE is that a person feels like their mind is perfectly normal, and therefore the situation that they find themselves in is ridiculous and impossible. This is different than being in a dream, for example, where you're (from our waking perspective) out of your body all the time. When you're dreaming, you don't know that you're not occupying your physical body in a normal way. You're in dream conscious-

ness. And it's the clarity of consciousness in an OBE that causes people to think that this simply can not be really happening. People generally feel perfectly awake, perfectly conscious, and yet they're floating up to the damn ceiling. So they automatically think, this just can't be happening!

**David: I've had OBE-type experiences with psychedelics—such as DMT and ketamine—but I was unquestionably in an altered state of consciousness at the time, and it seemed more like going into other dimensions of reality, which I guess is closer to dreaming than the type of OBEs that you're describing. With all my psychedelic use, I've never had an experience where it felt like my normal mind was just floating above my body. I find that absolutely astonishing that people have that experience.**

Charles: Yes, that's the archetypal OBE; the mind remains clear. There are a lot of psychedelic experiences where the concept of what it means to be in a body can get pretty hazy. We call that an OBE, but I think that can be confusing. I like to get clarity in the descriptions that we're talking about, and that's why I say that this feeling of your consciousness being clear, normal, and logical is characteristic of the OBE.

**David: How is a NDE similar to and different from a psychedelic experience?**

Charles: I wish that I could say we have a lot of studies that have made detailed phenomenological comparisons, but of course we haven't.

The NDE is, of course, centered around the fact that you think that you've died, which is a pretty powerful centering device. It usually includes the feeling of moving through a tunnel, toward a light, contact with other beings, and a quick life review. A psychedelic experience may not have all of these characteristics. Some of the characteristics may be present, but certain details of the NDE may be missing, like the quick life review or the speedy return to normal consciousness. Now, this is interesting. This is one of the very vivid differences between psychedelic experiences and NDEs. With NDEs you can feel like you're way out there somewhere, and then "they" say that you have to go back, and bang! You're back in your body and everything is normal again. With psychedelics, of course, you come down more slowly, and don't usually experience a condensed life review. So that's what the major difference is. But psychedelic experiences also reach over a far wider terrain of possibilities.

Let me tell you something about the life review. It's extremely common in NDEs for persons to undergo a life review, where they feel as if they remember at least every important event in their life, and often they say every single event in their life. Sometimes it even expands out into not only remembering and reliving every single event in their life, but also into knowing psychically the reactions of other people to all their actions. For some it must be horrible, because it seems that you would really experience their pain. I very seldom hear people say anything about a life review on psychedelics. Yeah, occasionally past memories have come up, but not this dramatic review of a person's whole life.

**David: Do you see any similarity in the consequences, or the aftereffects of a NDE and a psychedelic experience? Do they have any similar consequences, or long-lasting effects for people?**

Charles: The are sometimes consequences that overlap and are mutual, but I would say that the NDE is more powerful. It's more powerful in the sense that a person may make more drastic changes in their lifestyle, or in their community, if they try to integrate the acceptance of the NDE and make sense out of it. It's also more powerful in the sense that it's more liable to cause more lasting changes. A psychedelic experience can also have powerful life-changing effects. But let's face it, some people can pretty much forget their psychedelic experience afterwards, much less alter their lives. It can simulate certain aspects of the NDE, but it doesn't carry the same force that the typical NDE does.

**David: This actually rings true with my own experience. My psychedelic experiences were pale compared to the time that my car went over a cliff.**

Charles: Ah, okay. I didn't know that you had a NDE.

**David: For about a year, the experience allowed me to appreciate life in a completely new and joyous way, and it eliminated my fear of just about everything, including death. However, this new state of perception faded away after about a year. I'm wondering what sort of biological value or psychological function you think that NDEs have?**

Charles: To the people who have them, they usually feel that they've gotten profound insight into the way that their life ought to be, just from that one experience. With psychedelics, again, there's a wide of range of experiences. It can range from a low sensory-enhancement level—where you see a lot of pretty colors and images, and afterwards you just say, now let's go out and get back to work—up to really deep levels of insight into the nature of one's mind. So there's a very wide range of experiences that are possible with psychedelics.

But with NDEs there is the feeling of being absolutely beyond one's life experience. This raises interesting possibilities then because not everybody who comes near death reports having had a NDE. Could there be a lot of NDEs that are psychologically repressed? Does this happen sometimes? It's an interesting discussion I've been having with some of my colleagues. If you do or don't recover a memory of this state, how do you know if it's something that really happened or not? It's possible that our minds might make something up, or repress certain experiences, so it's tricky. But it's also quite interesting that some people come close to death and don't report having a NDE.

**David: What sort of relationship do you see between the NDE and various altered states of consciousness?**

Charles: (Laughter) You're asking me about my life's work, David. My really active research has been on altered states of consciousness. I began my research on dreams and hypnosis and it was very fascinating stuff. I loved the laboratory work that I was doing, but I slowly became aware that there were a lot of other methods for altering consciousness, and a lot of different altered states. So I had to stop specializing so much, and tried to get a feeling for that whole spectrum, including psychedelics, and learned about methods like meditation. We also included emotional states of consciousness. So your question is almost like asking, what's the relationship of life to life? You've got to narrow it down more specifically. (Laughter)

**David: I guess I was just looking to see if there were any aspects of a NDE that are common in other altered states of consciousness, or whether you think there's something really unique about a NDE.**

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Charles: Oh, I think it's pretty unique. Very few people have had a near-death experience, and say, well, there was a little element of this and a little element of that.

**David: I've heard of some situations where people had hellish NDEs.**

Charles: Yes, there are a few like that. The fact that there are only a few is disappointing to right-wing Christians, who think the majority of people should get a taste of Hell, because that's what they deserve. But it's very rarely reported. The rarity of reports might be because they actually are very rare. Or it might mean that a lot of cases, if you look at them more closely, are partially forgotten or not reported quite accurately. A NDE could also be very scary to some people who are really afraid of OBEs or altered states of consciousness. Or it might be that they are much more common than we think, but people just don't report them. Can you imagine someone saying, "I almost died and God told me that I was going to Hell." That's not a very good way to enter a social relationship. *(Laughter)*

**David: *(Laughter)* No, I guess not. Charles, what do you personally think happens to consciousness after death?**

Charles: After doing more than fifty years of professional work with consciousness now, one of the things that's really been interesting to me is that it's become more and more clear that there's an aspect of consciousness that appears to transcend physical or material reality. At the same time, it's also clear to me that a lot of our ordinary consciousness is very dependent on being shaped by the nature of our bodies, or at least by our brains. Clearly, that shaping is completely gone from one's reality after death.

I was once asked what I thought about the evidence for survival after death, and I summed it up by saying this. When I die, I expect that I'll probably be unconscious for a bit—but I expect to recover from it. On the other hand, I'm not quite sure that the "I" that will recover from death will be the same "I" who dies. I think that there's going to be some major changes in whatever survives, and this is a gross generalization.

There is a very large body of literature about the possibility that consciousness survives death, and I've been running a discussion group with many of the world's experts about this for years. The commonality of the NDE helped to decrease my bias against what I thought was an impossibility. However, I think that although consciousness probably survives death, it probably doesn't survive in quite the same form as we're used to. However, if people merely believe in an afterlife it may influence their interpretation of the evidence.

**David: I think that it's just so fascinating that, depending on how one looks at the situation, there's an abundance of evidence both for and against the survival of consciousness after death. Like psychic phenomena, I think that a big part of what people usually believe about what happens to consciousness after death is based more upon their spiritual or philosophical assumptions than on an examination of the scientific evidence.**

Charles: I should also add here too that I'm one of the few people who tried to say, let's rationally look at the phenomena that might suggest survival, and try and make sense of it—with a little proviso that ordinary rationality is not the only way to understand something. That was very hard to do, and very few people, I think, are anywhere near objectively looking at the evidence at all. Most people form a belief, stubbornly try to protect it, and don't want to look at anything that might challenge that belief.

Earlier in this conversation I said that I'd like to see a fair, evidence-based comparison between the NDE and other states of consciousness, but I discovered that people, even doctors, aren't usually interested in asking questions that challenge their beliefs. But this is not science. To me, everything is open to examination. Everything. Now, this doesn't mean we can really see everything, but we have to look at everything—even those areas where we have a lot of emotional investment. •

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