

Near-Death Experiences in Thailand

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ABSTRACT: Near-death experiences (NDEs) in Thailand do not demonstrate the episodes most noted in those collected in the West, but they do show consistent features. I argue that these features, including harbingers of death, visions of hell, the Lord of the underworld, and the benefits of making donations to Buddhist monks and temples, can be understood within the framework of beliefs and customs unique to Southeast Asia. The simplest explanation is that the phenomenology of NDEs at least in part fulfills the individuals' expectations of what they will experience at death. These expectations are most often derived from the experiencer's culture, subculture, or mix of cultures. Culture-bound expectations are, in turn, most often derived from religion. One case, quoted at length, shows features that suggest that the individual was experiencing stress as a result of living in both Thai and Chinese cultures. Although the phenomenology of Thai NDEs is at variance from those in the West, the typical episodes that appear in each seem to follow a comparable sequencing. This similarity in structure suggests that NDEs in both cultures have a common function.

KEY WORDS: near-death experience; Buddhism.

Several studies (Kellehear, 1993; Pasricha and Stevenson, 1986; Schorer, 1985–86) have indicated that the phenomenologies of near-death experiences (NDEs) are culture-bound. The observation that the “being of light” can appear differently according to a person's

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expectations of what God will be like (Osis and Haraldsson, 1975) supports the notion that a religion also plays a role. In this article, I will examine ten NDEs collected in Thailand, a culture with a very high degree of religiosity.

I will argue in support of the notion that the phenomenology of NDEs is not determined by a person's culture, but rather reflects that person's expectations of what death will be like. These expectations are most often, though not always, derived from a person's culture. Culture-bound expectations about death, whether held consciously or unconsciously, are in turn most often, but not always, derived from the culture's religious traditions. NDE phenomenology is both highly individualized, and at the same time shared by many people. Culture is universal, but so are deviations from its norms.

Thailand is an appropriate place to test the influence of culture on NDEs for several reasons. First, the indigenous culture is still the dominant culture. Except for a very brief period during its occupation by the Japanese, Thailand has never been colonized. In many cases, traditions begun in its classical period continue up to the present. Second, Thailand's religion is exceptionally uniform, with more than 95 percent of its people being raised in the Theravadin Buddhist tradition. Third, Thai popular ideas about death are derived largely from a single source, a still untranslated popular religious text called *Phra Malaya*, which is the name of a medieval monk whose "visions" of heaven and hell are described in it. I suspected that Thailand's relative cultural uniformity and absence of competing traditions on death and dying might engender consistent features in their NDEs that do not appear in those found in the West.

While living in Thailand for two years, I was able to gather many death-related images from that culture, and to learn enough about Thai beliefs to see that their concepts about death and dying were very different from those in the West. I speculated that these differences might have an influence on the phenomenology of near-death experiences (NDEs) in Thailand. Due to temporal and financial constraints, I was able to gather accounts of NDEs only from Thai popular literature rather than from first-hand interviews with NDErs. I was, however, able to participate fully in the translation process, and working with printed matter allowed me to make sure of the translations on a reliable word-by-word basis. I confined my study to those published NDE accounts that were transcribed from actual interviews or those provided by Dhebhanom Muangman, President of the Bangkok Institute

for Psychological Research and Advisor to the Governor of Bangkok, whose credentials allowed me to accept the reliability of the accounts he provided. These three sources yielded ten NDE accounts.

Phra Malaya

The *Phra Malaya* is the only important source of Thai ideas and expectations about death and dying. There are alternate ideas to be found in the more strict classical Buddhist Dharma, but they are not well known by the general population. The *Phra Malaya* recounts the visions of heaven and hell experienced by a medieval monk (Phra Malaya) during his meditation. It first describes his descent into hell. There, he witnessed the hall in which Yama, the Lord of the Dead, assigned the souls of the dead to their appropriate rebirths. There were several options for rebirth available. A person could be reborn as a human with any social status and any degree of attractiveness, as any type of animal, into any one of fourteen hells, or into any one of nine heavens.

Phra Malaya then toured the hells, where he witnessed many specific tortures inflicted on those who had committed specific various types of sins. In the center of the hells was the court of Yama, the Lord of the Underworld, whom Phra Malaya saw judging both humans and animals. After that, he visited a number of heavens. One NDE account of heaven could easily be illustrated by graphics appearing in popular editions of *Phra Malaya*. The apocryphal Theravadin Buddhist texts, the *Vimanavatthu* (Horner, 1974) and the *Petavatthu* (Gehman, 1974), describe many of the same tortures that appear in the *Phra Malaya*. Both the heavens and the hells he saw bear strong similarities to those described in two Buddhist classical commentaries, the 12th-century *Abhidhammatta Sangaha of Acariya Anuruddha* (Bodhi, 1993) and the 14th-century *Vissudhimagga* of Buddhaghosa Acariya (Buddhaghosa, 1975). It is well worth noting that description of hell in the *Phra Malaya* also echoes the one given in the Hindu classical scripture, the *Shivapuranas* (Shastri, 1978).

After his tour of hell, Phra Malaya then saw two “future” periods, the “age of Migasanni,” a sinful era dominated by violence, and the “time of Sri Ariya,” a heavenly future where, among other things, wish-fulfilling trees will grow. These trees are said to produce whatever a person sitting under them wishes for, and to grow jewels instead of fruit. Illustrations accompanying the text also show all the inhabitants of this heaven as

being young and attractive, well-dressed, and always as couples looking very much in love. Phra Malaya also visited other levels of heaven, "The Abode of Brahma" and "The Abode of Indra," where the deities of Thai religion reside.

The *Phra Malaya* seems to have no analog in the Judeo-Christian world. A comparable situation would have been if Dante's *Divine Comedy* (Alighieri, 1955/14th century) were the sole source of Western concepts about death and dying, and that his descriptions of heaven and hell were given the status of absolute truth. Of course, there are differences between this scenario and the current Thai reality. In fact, there is an alternate set of teachings imported by the Chinese, but one which is quite similar, being also heavily influenced by Buddhist traditions. Chinese mythology also has multiple heavens and hells, and the Lord of the Underworld, Yama, appears in both traditions (Williams, 1976). Furthermore, Thailand's religious makeup is not absolutely uniform; there is a small minority of Christians and Muslims. Nevertheless, to imagine a Christian community which had no ideas about the experience of death not found in Dante's *Divine Comedy* might provide a helpful metaphor for understanding how death and dying are seen in the Thai cultural context. All the NDEs I found in Thailand demonstrated motifs for which I know of no local sources except the *Phra Malaya*, with the significant exception of the case of Kodien, which I will examine below.

Yamatoots

One motif that occurs in nine of my ten cases of Thai NDEs is that of Yamatoots. Yamatoots are messengers sent from Yama's office, which Phra Malaya located in the center of hell, to take the dying person to see Yama. One account of a premortem visitation includes the gradual approach of a pair of Yamatoots. Yamatoots can have many different appearances. My cases include "two white-robed young men," a classical Yamatoot three times life size, and a group of three wearing turbans, while the most common instances are of a pair of Yamatoots that come to take the NDEr. Yamatoots state their business very directly in Thai NDEs. They are truly "fell sergeants and strict in their arrest." One told an NDEr that it was time to die and be taken for judgment. Another simply announced: "We've come to take you to hell." Two of my Thai accounts are of NDEs happening to the same people twice. In one of these cases, the same Yamatoot appeared twice. In Bangkok I saw a motorcycle safety poster showing two men on motorcycles, one weaving

wildly in and out of traffic, with a Yamatoot on the back of his bike, the other staying in line, with an angel for a passenger. Yamatoots appear often in Thai popular comics, advertisements, religious morality books and posters, and popular television.

Making Merit

After the *Phra Malaya*, the next significant factor influencing Thai expectations of what it will be like to die is their beliefs associated with the custom of “making merit,” or *tham boon*. The concept of merit is closely akin to, but not identified with, positive karma. Merit is often spoken of as the source of good luck, as a religious practice, and as a kind of moral currency. Any compassionate, wise, or generous action is said to create merit; but one of the most powerful ways to make merit available to the laity is by donating food, money, or clothing to the Buddhist monks. It is commonly believed that the best way to make merit, outside of becoming a monk, is to fund the construction of a temple, or failing that, to fund the repair or restoration of a temple (Wells, 1975).

I thought of my family, but I could not see any way to get back to them. The voice told me that I would not see them. It said that I could cry if I wanted. At these words I burst out crying. Then I saw a woman wearing green clothes. She had long hair, and spoke so sweetly. She said to me: “This is your food. Please eat it. We have a long walk ahead of us.” I ate all of the food. There were fried eggs, an omelette, beef curry, chicken curry, and candied eggs. These were all my favorite foods, prepared just as my mother had made them for me. I was full after this, and I became thirsty. I told this woman that I wanted some water. She said that there was no water for me here, because I had never donated anything to drink to the monks or to a temple. I was very thirsty, and I thought that if I could regain my life, I would never forget to donate cool drinks to the monks I went to visit. After a long walk with this angelic woman, I came home, where I revived. I was so thirsty. (Suwannathat, n.d., Vol. 2, from chapter on pp. 171–203)

Merit seems to grow over time, being augmented by karmically-positive actions, but at the same time being eroded by sinful action, or *baap*. The types of behaviors considered to be sinful are the usual types cited in most religions, such as killing, gambling, theft, and adultery. A caption in a poster I purchased in a Bangkok religious supply shop reads: “Yama judges man and beast according to boon and baap.” The accompanying illustration shows Yama seated next to a scale whose arms are hung with signs reading “boon” and “baap.” The implication

is clear: merit and sin offset one another. One goes to heaven or hell according to the balance of the scales. How much merit a person has is less important than whether or not it outweighs one's burden of sin. The reviews of karma that occur in my collection of Thai NDEs are confined to examinations of single sins, as though their "next birth" were to be determined by either a single actions, or a specific behavioral pattern represented by a single action. Four of my ten cases include being accused of this sin by accountants reading from books, as if Yama's accountants were looking at only the balance due, in contrast to the panoramic life review in Western NDEs that covers all the transactions. This commercial metaphor becomes more apt when we realize that Yama's record-keepers are referred to as "accountants" in several NDEs.

I climbed these stairs and found myself in the judgment hall of Yama's palace. I knew that they were ready to judge me for my sins. A giant rooster appeared who told Yama that I had killed him. He emphasized that I had tried to kill him again and again. The rooster said that he remembered me exactly. An entire flock of roosters also appeared and testified that I had killed them, as well. I remembered my actions, and I had to admit that the roosters had told the truth. Yama said that I had committed many sins, and sentenced me to many rebirths, both as a chicken and many other kinds of birds. After these births, I would then be reborn as an angelic being (Thevada) due to my having performed meritorious actions many times. (Suwannathat, n.d., Vol. 2, from chapter on pp. 126–136)

Mistaken Identity

Thai NDErs, like those from India, often report having been told that they were taken by mistake, that they were the wrong person, and that they must return to life. I will discuss this further below.

He then found himself in front of Yama, the lord of the underworld. Yama looked into a book in which his actions were written. Before the judgment could begin, Yama said that he was the wrong person and had to be taken back. The patient "sneaked" a look into the book, and he saw that it was written in Thai. Surprised, (possibly because he expected it to be written in Pali) he took a closer look, and saw the name of a person he knew from his village, with the date of his death written as three days after his own NDE. The man named in Yama's book did, in fact, die on the date named. (D. Muangman, personal communication, 1997)

Yama told me that I had committed a number of sins, especially in having butchered a number of chickens. I denied it, and said that I

had not done that, not even once. Yama was surprised, and asked his records-keeper, "How old is he?" "Thirteen years, lord," came the answer. "What's his name?" My name was read out. Yama said "You've taken the wrong man. Take him back." (Suwannathat, n.d., Vol. 2, from chapter on pp. 126–136)

Someone came to lead him into a building. . . . There were many people in the building. He was led to the right, and into a room with a large table in the center. There were three men sitting at the table, which had several stacks of books on it. The man sitting in the middle seemed to be the boss. The other two were looking into books opened before them.

After Kodien sat down, the one in the middle asked for his name and age. The boss asked the one on the right to check to see if it was correct. They found that it was not correct. The boss told the one on the left to take him back quickly, (Suwannathat, n.d., Vol. 3, from chapter on pp. 9–24)

Karma

The laws of karma are apparently subject to interpretation in Thai NDEs. One case includes an account of a Yamatoot whose positive and negative karmas each created separate effects, while another includes an account of the effects of negative karma being canceled out by positive karma.

The Yamatoot . . . revealed that he himself had both merit and sins, so that he had to spend some of his days as an animal, and some as an angel. During his life, he had earned his money by torturing both men and animals. He promoted bullfights, cockfights, and boxing matches. Then, he said, he took the money, and used it to make donations, so that he could create merit. This merit helped him to become an angel, while the sins committed by encouraging these fights helped him to be an animal. (Suwannathat, n.d., Vol. 7, from chapter on pp. 103–114)

I . . . found myself in the judgment hall of Yama's palace. I knew that they were ready to judge me for my sins. A giant rooster appeared who told Yama that I had killed him. He emphasized that I had tried to kill him again and again. The rooster also said that he remembered me exactly. An entire flock of roosters also testified that I had killed them, as well. I remembered my actions, and I had to admit that the roosters had told the truth. Yama said that I had committed many sins, and sentenced me to many rebirths both as a chicken, and many other types of birds as well. . . . But, quite suddenly, an enormous turtle appeared. It screamed at Yama, saying, "Don't take him, he is a good human, and should be allowed to live." Yama answered the turtle: "What did he do to help you?" The turtle answered: "Long ago, I almost died because another of these humans wanted to eat me. This man prevented him, and so I was able to live out my life." Yama asked

the turtle if he had any evidence. The turtle asked to be turned upside down, and told Yama to look at his underside where he would see where the man had carved his name so many years ago.

Yama saw the man's name was there just as the turtle had said, and he believed the turtle's story. Yama announced that he was cancelling the sentence, and told me that when I revived, I was to take a vow not to kill any living thing. (Suwannathat, n.d., Vol. 2, from chapter on pp. 126–136)

Although most Thai Buddhists will agree that there are laws governing karma and its effects, there is neither agreement nor finality concerning the specific processes that occur when these laws are operating. This creates a diversity in the teachings that allows individuals a wide latitude in understanding how karma operates. I suggest that the idea of karma is used as a medium to explicate the “karmic effects” individuals unconsciously expect from their behavior during their lives, and that individual psychodynamics manifest in the specific operation of karma as it appears in any given Thai NDE. The most popular expression of the laws of karma in Southeast Asia is the formula: “Do good; receive good. Do bad; receive bad.” I suggest that so long as this rule is preserved, NDErs in Southeast Asia can confabulate any “laws of karma” that can explicate their feelings about their lives without violating their religious paradigm. The supposition that the karmic review is a culture-specific example of the life review seems reasonable.

The Case of Kodien

One of the most interesting cases of the effects of karma manifesting in an NDE is in the case of Kodien, a Chinese-Thai.

[Kodien] . . . came on a group of his friends who had died six or seven years ago. He realized that these were people who had died but had not yet been cremated. Now he understood that he was really dead. He came to a lawn in front of an office building where there were many groups of people with sad, pale faces. . . . He noticed that some of the groups had food and water, while others had only had piles of ash. He wanted to ask for some water, but he didn't know anyone who he could ask. He kept on walking until he saw one group where there was someone he knew. A friend who had died recently. His friend greeted him with a smile. He asked for something to eat. Kodien asked “Is this your food?” His friend said “Yes, but you can't eat any of it, because it doesn't belong to you. We cannot give any of it to anyone else. Your food is over there.” Kodien's friend pointed to a pile of ash. Kodien said “How can I eat that?” His friend only laughed for an answer. Kodien said “You're just teasing me,” and reached to take a drink of water

without waiting for permission [as is the custom in Thailand where hospitality is often taken for granted, especially in rural areas]. He found that the water was scalding. He asked his friend: "How can you drink it when it is so hot?" With a smile, Kodien's friend took the glass and drank it, saying that it didn't belong to Kodien. His friend said that those who made merit by donating food to the monks during their lives would have food, while those who only helped their own ancestors (by burning joss-paper replicas of food according to Chinese tradition) would only have piles of ash. Kodien realized that his friend was suggesting that he create merit according to the Thai custom, but during his life he had not believed in the practice. He had thought that the Chinese forms of religious observance were better, and had only made joss-paper offerings. Then someone came and asked Kodien's friend to come inside the building. Kodien sat down for a while, still thinking about food. Soon, someone came to lead him into the building as well. There were many people in the building. He was led to the right, and into a room with a large table in the center. (Suwannathat, n.d., Vol. 3, from chapter on pp. 9–24)

In this case, the Chinese merit-making practices Kodien followed were rejected in favor of the Thai practices. Kodien was a Chinese person raised in Thailand. His NDE seemed to reveal that he was actually more drawn to the Thai ways of creating merit than to those of his own family and subculture. That the NDE of a person torn between two cultures should exhibit features of both suggests that it is not culture alone that determines NDE phenomenology. Rather, NDEs may be determined more by one's expectations concerning what death will be like, even when those expectations are held subconsciously or are influenced by more than one culture. Significantly, Atwater (1994) has found that NDEs with visions of the classical Western hell are much more likely to occur in the Southeastern part of the United States, the so-called "Bible Belt," where the literal veracity of the Bible is often taken for granted.

The case of Kodien seems to rule out culture by itself as the determinative factor in shaping NDE phenomenology. His case reflected expectations drawn from two cultures. The fact that Thai (and Indian) NDEs do not follow the typical Western progression reflected by Kenneth Ring's (1980) temporal model seems to rule out the possibility that there is an ideal or normal NDE scenario, except within a particular cultural context.

Unique Features of Thai NDEs

NDEs manifested within certain groups have shown characteristic variations. Pediatric NDEs (Morse, Conner, and Tyler, 1985), and those

of preliterate cultures (Kellehear, 1993), as well as those of India (Pasricha and Stevenson, 1986), and Africa (Morse and Perry, 1992) have been studied, and patterns can be discerned in each group. However, the most common approach to discussing their typical features has been to compare them to the typical Western NDE, to the pattern elucidated by Ring (1980). Accounts of Western NDEs would seem to be useless in helping Thais know what to expect at their deaths. There is some value in a structural comparison of Thai NDEs with Western ones, while a phenomenological comparison will show how much NDEs need to be interpreted in terms of each culture's own frame of reference for death and dying.

Tunnels are rare, if not absent, in Thai NDEs. The panoramic life review also appears to be absent. Instead, my collection shows people reviewing just a few karmically-significant incidents. Perhaps they are expressions of behavioral tendencies, the results of which are then experienced as determinative of their rebirths. These incidents are read out to them from a book in a kind of courtroom setting. There is no "being of light" in these Thai NDEs. The Buddha does appear, but only in a symbolic form, and in only one case:

I asked [the Yamatoot] to take me to see the Lord Buddha. I told him I needed to see The Buddha. The Yamatoot looked at the sky and pointed. "That big star," he said, "is The Buddha. And those little stars are the other enlightened ones; those who have followed the Dharma [the Buddhist teachings] to the end. I'm afraid you won't be able to see them in any other form. You are not pure enough." (Suwannathat, n.d., Vol. 2, from chapter on pp. 126–136)

Like the "being of light" in Western life reviews, Yama was present during this same NDE during its karmic review, which dealt only with the experiencer having killed chickens; but Yama is anything but a being of light. In popular Thai depictions, he is shown as a wrathful being, and is most often remembered for his power to condemn one to hell. Some of the functions of angels and guides (Lundahl, 1992) are also filled by Yama's servants, the Yamatoots. They guide, lead tours of hell, and are even seen to grant requests made by the experiencer.

Yamatoots and OBEs

In Western NDEs, the most common initial phase is an out-of-body experience (OBE). In all ten of my Thai NDEs, the most common initial phase is a visitation by a Yamatoot, one of the servants of Yama. Dhebhanom Muangman provided me with an account of pre-mortem

visions that included three separate visits by Yamatoots. The mythology of Yama and his servants was imported to Thailand from India along with much of the Hindu/Vedic pantheon, and it can still be found in contemporary Indian NDEs (Pasricha and Stevenson, 1986). Interestingly, OBEs in Thai NDEs tend immediately to precede meetings with Yamatoots. Phenomenologically, the appearance of a herald of death and an OBE could not be more disparate. The function of OBEs and Yamatoots could be the same: to convey the news that one has died. Every NDE I found in Thailand featured either a Yamatoot or someone else who came to “take” the NDEr. One account included a kind of rebellion by a Yamatoot:

Both of the [Yamatoots] were carrying torches. They looked about thirty years old, and had very dark skin. They only said: “Let’s go.” I asked them: “Where are you taking me?” They answered: “Don’t ask.” . . . One of them said to the other: “He is too young, so I’m not going to help you. You do it alone; I have another job to attend to. Eventually, the remaining Yamatoot forced me to go with him. (Suwannathat, n.d., Vol. 2, from chapter on pp. 126–136)

The OBE may rely on a specific neurological function. The neurosurgeon Wilder Penfield accidentally induced an OBE while stimulating the surface of a patient’s brain with an electrode (Penfield, 1955). The OBE occurs in many contexts outside of NDEs. It has also been reported in meditation experiences, febrile delirium, shamanic “journeys,” temporal lobe epilepsy, and dissociative disorders, and it can even occur spontaneously. During an autoscopic OBE, one still perceives the physical world, so it cannot validate culture-specific beliefs about postmortem experience. A person having an OBE will still perceive his or her surroundings. There are few reports, if any, of a person having an OBE while simultaneously seeing the being of light. Perhaps the recognition that one has died is easier if one experiences what one has been taught will occur at death. Thus, while an OBE may well be found in NDEs of all cultures, not all cultures recognize OBEs as a herald of death. Indeed, in one of our cases, a monk experiencing an NDE initially mistook his NDE-related OBE for one appearing in his meditation:

One night, close to midnight, he sat down to do vipassana meditation. He felt like he couldn’t breath, and he had heart palpitations. He began chanting in his mind “Being dead, being dead, being dead.” He felt a change in his state of consciousness, and found himself looking at his body from outside. He found himself thinking that he had just left his body for a little while the way it can happen during meditation. He walked downstairs, and he saw 4 people standing at the bottom of the stairs. One of them said that a Yamatoot had told them to come

and take him. He was shocked. It was then that he realized that this was not a meditative out-of-body experience. He asked: "Am I dead?" (Suwannathat, n.d., Vol. 7, from chapter on pp. 103–114)

Some cultures seem to have anthropomorphic harbingers that inform the experiencer of his or her deaths independently of OBEs. Yamatoots, the Grim Reaper, and angels all have appeared as harbingers of death. Perhaps Yamatoots "back-up" OBEs.

It has been reported that hallucinatory phenomena are facilitated by altered states of consciousness (Horowitz and Adams, 1970). We might speculate that the altered state of consciousness that occurs in conjunction with OBEs can also facilitate anthropomorphic imagery that conveys the approach of death. If this were the case, then Yamatoots and OBEs would each have the same function: to make the person aware that he or she is dead.

This notion might also help to explain why tunnels, common in Western NDEs and having a possible neurological basis (Blackmore, 1993), are also largely absent in Thai NDEs. Tunnels might symbolize moving from one state of consciousness to another. Roads, or the act of walking, might symbolize the same thing in Thai and some Indian NDEs. Indeed, most of my collection features one or the other. One of my cases did feature a tunnel, but it did not occur at the beginning of the experience, as it most often would in Western NDEs. Rather, it appeared following an interview with Yama, who asked if the NDEr wanted to see hell. The experiencer answered "yes," and the entry into the first level of hell was made "by opening a tunnel."

Affect in Thai NDEs

Hell

The light seems to be absent in Thai NDEs, as is the profound positive affect found in so many Western NDEs. The most common affects in my collection were negative. Unlike the negative affect in so many Western NDEs (Greyson and Bush, 1992), that found in Thai NDEs (in all but one case) has two recognizable causes: fear of "going" and horror and fear of hell. It is worth noting that although five of my ten cases included seeing hell and being forced to witness the same horrific tortures that appeared in the *Phra Malaya*, none included the NDErs having been subjected to any of these torments themselves. The same can be said about hell in medieval European NDEs (Zaleski, 1987).

The Yamatoots guided me to a torture chamber; one for those who had committed murder. I saw guards hitting the prisoners on the head with an iron hammer. People were being chopped into pieces. They re-assembled themselves, and were then chopped up again and again, until the karma acquired by killing people was exhausted. After this process was finished, their pieces were fed to dogs and vultures with iron beaks. The Yamatoot explained that these prisoners were not afraid of making bad karmas; that they actually liked killing people. This torture, he said, was the result of their murderous karmas. After these karmas were extinguished, they would be reborn as animals in the earthly plane of existence. In that life they would have to die by being killed. They would not be allowed to live out their natural life-span.

The Yamatoot then took me to another torture chamber. I saw a path made of hot coals. The guard was forcing people to walk this path. If someone could not bear the pain, and stopped walking, the guards would stab them with spears, and thus, force them to continue. This process was repeated until the person was burned up completely. First their feet, then their calves, then their knees, and so forth. Their bodies then returned to their previous state, and the whole process was repeated. The Yamatoot explained that this path of hot coals was for those who had too many defilements (Kilesa) and desires (Tanha).

We came to another torture area. These prisoners were punished by having their tongues put between red hot pincers. I thought: "This is so horrible." They could not bear their punishment, and some tried to escape. They would run to get a drink of water. As they tried to scoop it into their mouths, it was turned into scalding hot oil. In pain, they rolled around on the ground, but even as they did so, nails grew under them. The Yamatoot explained that they were being punished like this because, during their lives, they were liars and slanderers.

I then saw a grove of Niew trees. There were many of them. They had large trunks. At the bases of these trees there were naked people trying to climb up. Anyone who would not climb was stabbed by the spears the Yamatoots held. I then came to the hell for those who drank, took heroin, or opium. There were more people in this hell than any other I had witnessed so far. Some were being boiled in a copper pot. Other had been set on fire, while still others were being forced to drink acid. They tried to escape to find water, but when they did so, it turned into boiling oil. Some were able to escape, but those who succeeded found themselves harassed by vultures with iron beaks.

The Yamatoot said that this was the last place we would visit in hell. (Suwannathat, n.d., Vol. 2)

Heaven

The deep feelings of bliss, ecstasy, and "the peace which passeth understanding" are not mentioned in my collection. The positive affects that do occur are those of pleasantness, comfort, a sense of beauty, and

happiness, while one experiencer spoke of his feeling that those whom he saw living in heaven were happy without mentioning his own feelings about being there. It is also worth noting that I have one case in which the experiencer saw only heaven, without also having seen hell. Most cases include both positive and negative affects. At least one similar case involving both heavenly and hellish elements in the West has already been noted in the literature (Irwin and Bramwell, 1988).

The Yamatoot asked me if I really wanted to see heaven. "If so, then you must contemplate the three treasures of The Lord Buddha, His Teachings, and the community of monks who follow his teachings. Concentrate your mind, pray, and you will go to heaven. After I closed my eyes and put my hands in the prayerful gesture, the Yamatoot disappeared and I was no longer in hell. I found myself in another place which was very pleasant. The weather was nice; I was no longer hungry. I saw a garden with trees all in rows. It was very beautiful, like the garden of a king or a millionaire. As I walked into the garden, I smelled some flowers. They were so very fragrant, with a scent I had never known before. Next, I saw some angels, both male and female. They glided through the air. They were dressed beautifully, and wore exquisite jewelry. Some had flowers in their hair. I kept walking, and saw a pavilion with a roof like that of a palace. There was an angelic man sitting inside. His body was surrounded by a green halo. I approached the angel, sat down and made obeisances. I asked: "Who are you? Where am I?" He answered: "I am the lord of the angels, and this is the angelic world." I then recognized that this was none other than Indra, the King of Heaven. He said to me: "When you go back to your world, you should teach your fellow men not to commit sins, as it causes them to go to hell. If they do good, and behave in a moral manner, they will be reborn in my heaven.

"I will show you the mercy of teaching you the Dharma, the sacred law." He imparted this knowledge by opening my wisdom eye. I then saw all the truths of the universe. The future, the past, and the present. After six earthly days, Indra told me that he would take me to another level of heaven, The World of Brahma. I saw Brahma, the creator of the universe. His face was similar to Indra's, with a fresh, clean look about it that indicated mercy, compassion, loving kindness, and equanimity. He had a golden halo. Brahma explained that the angels in his level of heaven were all on their way to take new births in the ordinary world. Therefore, there were many houses that were empty. He was waiting for those who had created much merit during their lives to take rebirth there, but they were very few. Those who were there had mostly been monks who had been strict in their observance of the monastic rule.

"You have been separated from your body for 7 days," he said. "If you don't return soon, you will not be able to." (Suwannathat, n.d., Vol. 2)

Dead Friends and Relatives

Dead friends and relatives do appear in Thai NDEs, but in contrast to Western NDEs, these dead friends do not greet the dying person. Instead, in three of the four cases where the motif occurred in my collection of Thai NDEs, the dead friends seemed to inform the dying person of the rules governing the afterlife.

[I was taken] . . . to the next level of heaven. There, I found many of my old friends. Most of whom were soldiers. They were very happy to see me. I thought that this was where I was going to be forever. They did not know that I would revive. There were 10 people. Some of them gave me food and water. Others took me to see even more friends. Some of them were sleeping on a bed. All of them were feeling bad because they were separated from their families.

I asked them, "Where is my bed?" They said, "There is no bed for you here because this is not your home. Your home is in the next level up. It's better up there." I asked them to make a temporary bed for me, but they said that it was impossible. "We have only two pieces of wood, and only two nails." I said, "Never mind. I'm in a hurry. I must go now." (Suwannathat, n.d., Vol. 2)

Five of the 10 Thai NDEs in my collection included the experiencers being told that they were the wrong person, and being ordered back to life. In contrast, Western NDEs often end with the person choosing to return. Westerners might also find themselves spontaneously returning to their bodies, as also happens in Thai NDEs. It appears that, whereas Westerners might choose to revive, Thais and Indians are forced to revive. The Thai and Indian cultures do not reward independence and individuality the way Westerners do. Instead, these cultures encourage dependence on one's family, village, traditional religion, and so on. The idea that one has a choice about living or dying does not fit well in a culture where, traditionally, one cannot choose one's spouse, work, religion, or where to live. Parents arrange their children's marriages; children follow in their fathers' footsteps; live near your parents, if not with them; and worship in the same place and in the same way as the rest of the family. If the course of crucial life changes are imposed on Thais and Indians, will they not be more likely to confabulate being forced to revive than choosing to revive? One case in my collection ended with the NDEr being physically pushed into reviving.

A man dressed in black clothing came, and told Kodien to walk with him. The man walked in front, with Kodien walking behind. He led Kodien down a different road than the one he had taken on his way in.

This one was lined with trees, and was partly overgrown with grass. It was deserted. After a while they came on an old, sun-bleached water buffalo skeleton with a puddle of water next to it. Kodien was still thirsty, and sat down, intending to drink. Just as his hand was about to reach the water, he felt the man in black pushing him into the water from behind. At that instant, he blacked out. When he regained consciousness, he found himself in his coffin, and heard the sound of his own funeral. (Suwannathat, n.d., Vol. 3, from chapter on pp. 9–24)

Another motif that appears in Thai NDEs occurred in two of my ten cases. In these instances, the NDE ended with the person falling, and regaining consciousness upon hitting the floor or ground. The return to normal consciousness emerges as a separate theme, not to be confused with the decision to return to life.

One morning in 1982, while brushing his teeth, Sanit Tahnarat passed out for reasons unknown. He had an OBE in which he saw his own body, unconscious on the floor. He saw clouds approach him, and he was able to take hold of one. He found it was as hard as a stone. He climbed onto it, and sat down. The cloud carried him up to one of the heavens. He saw it was filled with diamonds and jewels. He moved up to another heaven, and saw that it had people dressed like angels. He wanted to see more, so he climbed up the clouds until he came to another plane. There were no people there, just spiritual lights. He heard a voice calling “grandfather” four times. At this, his hands became limp so that he could no longer hold on. As this happened, the cloud disappeared, and he fell to earth. When he hit the ground, he revived and found someone doing CPR on him. (Suwannathat, n.d., Vol. 1, from chapter on pp. 86–93)

I asked the Yamatoots to wait a while, because I had to tell my family that I was dead. I told them: “Nobody knows I’m here.” I walked to my house, stood in front of it for a minute, and then went inside. I saw there were a number of people there, and all of them were crying. I saw my husband and daughter sitting together. I tried to run to them, but I tripped on something. I fell. As I hit the floor, I revived. (Vissudhikoon, 1989, p. 146)

Conclusion

While some of the most common phenomenological features found in Western NDEs are either absent or rare in Thai NDEs, there are meaningful correlations that can be drawn. Typical phases appear in both, and with some typical order. Whereas Western NDEs often begin with travel through a tunnel to be greeted by dead friends and relatives, Thai NDEs usually begin with Yamatoots guiding the experimenter on a tour of hell. Thai NDErs may encounter Yama or more often

his assistants, the Yamatoots, rather than the being of light and angels reported in Western NDEs. Thai NDEs typically include a review of important karmas rather than a Western-style comprehensive life review, and a tour of hell and heaven rather than a transcendent experience. Whereas Western NDErs may reach a “point of no return” and choose to return to life, Thai NDErs are typically told they were taken because of a clerical mistake and told to return to the body.

The possibility arises that the same process occurs in both Western and Thai NDEs, and that the only significant differences are in terms of their culturally-derived phenomenological features. It may be that NDEs of all cultures share common patterns, but that these patterns are obscured by the different cultural phenomena through which they manifest. These Thai cases support the idea that NDEs may be characterized partly as subjective events occurring within specific contexts, in which individuals commonly use culturally-derived patterns to confabulate individualized death-process phenomena that serve common psychological functions.

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