

DISCUSSION FORUM

# NEAR DEATH EXPERIENCES AND THE DOCTRINE OF SUBTLE BODY

## 1. Introduction

One of the books which has made considerable impact in the realm of transpersonal psychology in recent years is *Life after Life* by Raymond, A. Moody, Jr.,<sup>1</sup> which carries a foreword by that other great explorer of the experience of death, Elisabeth Kubler-Ross.<sup>2</sup> Since it was first published in November 1975, it has been condensed in the *Reader's Digest*<sup>3</sup> and has been cited in other articles recalling near-death experiences.<sup>4</sup>

The bulk of the book deals with an analysis of those who revived after they had clinically died.<sup>5</sup> The chapter which immediately follows the analysis of these accounts cites parallels from four other sources to strengthen the general case of the book.<sup>6</sup> The sources cited are (1) the Bible;<sup>7</sup> (2) Plato;<sup>8</sup> (3) The Tibetan Book of the Dead<sup>9</sup> and (4) Emanuel Swedenborg.<sup>10</sup>

The aim of this paper is to draw attention to the fact that one very striking parallel, it seems, has been almost completely overlooked by the author—the parallel from the Hindu tradition of Vedānta. This paper attempts to close that gap.

## 2. Moody on Clinical-death Experience

One experience shared by many who had "died" and later came back to life was that of experiencing the presence of being in another

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1. Raymond A. Moody, Jr., *Life after Life* (Bantam edition, 1976).

2. *Ibid.*, Foreword.

3. *Reader's Digest*, March 1977, pp. 194-210.

4. See Charles Panati, Is there life after death? *Family Circle*, January 1977, p. 9, etc.

5. Raymond A. Moody, Jr., *Op. Cit.*, Chapter 2, pp. 19-109.

6. *Ibid.*, Chapter 3.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 111.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 115.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 119.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 122.

body. Raymond A. Moody, Jr., sums up the evidence on the point thus :

(1) Although in one or two cases the persons involved did not feel that they were in a body at all after dying, and although a few do not remember being in one, "Far and away the majority of my subjects, however, report that they did find themselves in another body upon release from the physical one".<sup>11</sup>

(2) This body is reported to possess the following properties :

- (a) it is invisible to others;<sup>12</sup>
- (b) "it lacks solidity; physical objects in the environment appear to move through it with ease";<sup>13</sup>
- (c) it is weightless;<sup>14</sup>
- (d) "almost everyone remarks upon the timelessness of the out-of-body state."<sup>15</sup>

(3) The shape of the body is hard to describe.

...all who have experienced it are in agreement that the spiritual body is nonetheless *something*, impossible to describe though it may be. It is agreed that the spiritual body has a form or shape (sometimes a globular or an amorphous cloud, but also sometimes essentially the same shape as the physical body) and even parts (projections or surfaces analogous to arms, legs, a head, etc.). Even when its shape is reported as being generally roundish in configuration, it is often said to have ends, a definite top and bottom, and even the "parts" just mentioned.

I have heard this new body described in many different terms, but one may readily see that much the same idea is being formulated in each case. Words and phrases which have been used by various sub-

11. Raymond A. Moody, Jr., *Op. Cit.*, p. 42.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 44.

13. *Ibid.*, "Travel, once one gets the hang of it, is apparently exceptionally easy in this state. Physical objects present no barrier, and movement from one place to another can be extremely rapid, almost instantaneous" (*Ibid.*, p. 46).

14. *Ibid.*, p. 45.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 47.

jects include a mist, a cloud, smoke-like, a vapor, transparent, a cloud of colors, wispy, an energy pattern and others which express similar meanings.<sup>16</sup>

On the basis of other accounts, however, more can be said about the shape of this body.

In their accounts, others have briefly mentioned the likeness of shape between their physical bodies and their new ones. One woman told me that while out of her body, "I still felt an entire body form, legs, arms, everything—even while I was weightless." A lady who watched the resuscitation attempt on her body from a point just below the ceiling says, "I was still in a body. I was stretched out and looking down. I moved my legs and noticed that one of them felt warmer than the other one."<sup>17</sup>

Perception in this new body displays certain peculiarities:

Perception in the new body is both like and unlike perception in the physical body.

On the other hand, senses which correspond to the physical senses of vision and of hearing are very definitely intact in the spiritual body, and seem actually heightened and more perfect than they are

16. *Ibid.*, pp. 46–47.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 50. The exact nature of the shape of this body is thus hard to determine. Is it protean?

It seems colours may also be associated with this subtle body. This point is developed in Jainism in relation to "the *kārmana śarīra* (body of subtle *karma* matter), corresponding to the *linga* or *sūkṣma śarīra* (subtle body) of the Sāmkhyas." On this view, *karma* imparts to the subtle body "a complexion (*lesyā*) that may be dark, blue, grey, yellow, red or white" (see Kalidas Bhattacharyya, ed., *The Cultural Heritage of India Vol. I* (Calcutta: The Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, 1958) p. 407). This may be compared with the following account: "Now, at this time, as soon as I felt my body, I took on the same form as the light. I got the feeling, and I'll have to use my own words for it, because I've never heard anyone talk about anything like this, that this form was definitely a spirit. It wasn't a body, just a wisp of smoke or a vapour. It looked almost like the clouds of cigarette smoke you can see when they are illuminated as they drift around a lamp. The form I took had colours, though. There was orange, yellow, and a colour that was very indistinct to me—I took it to be an indigo, a bluish colour" (quoted in Raymond A. Moody Jr., *Op. Cit.*, p. 102).

in physical life. One man says that while he was "dead" his vision seemed incredibly more powerful, and, in his words, "I just can't understand how I could see so far." A woman who recalled this experience notes, "It seemed as if this spiritual sense had no limitations, as if I could look anywhere and everywhere."

"Hearing" in the spiritual state can apparently be called so only by analogy, and most say that they do not really hear physical voices or sounds. Rather, they seem to pick up the thoughts of persons around them, and, as we shall see later, this same kind of direct transfer of thoughts can play an important role in the last stages of death experiences.

As one lady put it,

I could see people all around, and I could understand what they were saying. I didn't hear them, audibly, like I'm hearing you.

It was more like knowing what they were thinking, exactly what they were thinking, but only in my mind, not in their actual vocabulary. I would catch it the second before they opened their mouths to speak.

Finally, on the basis of one unique and very interesting report, it would appear that even severe damage to the physical body in no way adversely affects the spiritual one. In this case, a man lost the better part of his leg in the accident that resulted in his clinical death. He knew this, because he saw his damaged body clearly, from a distance, as the doctor worked on it. Yet, while he was out of his body:

I could feel my body, and it was whole. I know that. I felt whole, and I felt that all of me was there, though it wasn't.<sup>18</sup>

18. *Ibid.*, pp. 51-53.

### 3. Spiritual Body Vs. Subtle Body

What is striking about this description and properties of the "Spiritual body" is that it is very similar to the notion of the "subtle body" as it is found in two major Hindu systems of philosophy—those of Sāṅkhya and Vedānta.<sup>19</sup> As a matter of fact, it would be truer to say that this notion of the subtle body "seems to have been more or less the common property of all Indian philosophies, and supplied by the common language of the people."<sup>20</sup> In opposition to the physical or gross body (*sthūlaśarīra*), it is called the subtle-body (*sūkṣma-śarīra*).<sup>21</sup>

This notion of the subtle-body is quite old and the process of the differentiation of the human personality into various bodies can be traced back to the Upanishadic period,<sup>22</sup> that is, to a period anterior to the sixth century B.C. It is, however, clearly developed in later Vedāntic thought, especially in that branch of it known as *Advaita-Vedānta*. Thus the position of its main exponent, Śaṅkara of the ninth century A.D., may be summarized thus:

While the gross-body is dissolved at death, the subtle-body departs with the organs. It is related to the gross-body as the seed to the plant, or as the functions of seeing, hearing, etc., which depart with the soul, to the physical eye and ear.<sup>23</sup>

A popular fifteenth century text of *Advaita-Vedānta*, the Pañcadaśī of Vidyāranya, describes the human personality as composed of the three bodies—the physical, the subtle and the causal—or, alternatively, of five sheaths containing the elements of food, vital airs, mind, intellect and bliss. It then attempts a correlation of the bodies with the sheaths, which may not be without interest to modern researchers in transpersonal psychology.

The subtle-body, which is called the *sūkṣma* or *līṅga-śarīra*, comprises the five sensory organs, the five organs of action, the five vital airs, mind (*manas*) and intellect (*buddhi*), making seventeen parts in all (I, 15–23).

19. Some of the earliest Western writers on Hindu thought identified the existence of this concept, see Max Müller, *The Six Systems of Indian Philosophy* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1903), pp. 173–174, 299–300.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 173.

21. *Ibid.*

22. See Paul Deussen, *The Philosophy of the Upanishads* (New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1966 (first published 1906), p. 280 ff.

23. Paul Deussen, *Op. Cit.*, p. 265.

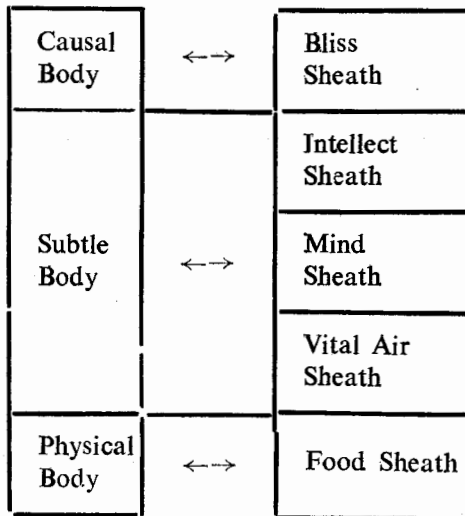
The five sheaths, enveloped in which the Self forgets its real nature and becomes subject to the cycle of births and deaths, are the food sheath, the vital sheath, the mind sheath, the intellect sheath and the bliss sheath.

The product of the quintuplicated elements called the gross-body is known as the food sheath (*annamayakoṣa*). That portion of the subtle-body which is composed of the five vital airs and the five organs of action, and which is the effect of the rajas aspect of *prakṛti*, is called the vital sheath (*prāṇamayakoṣa*).

The mind with its faculty of doubt (*vimarśa*) and the five sensory organs, products of the sattvic principle make up the mind sheath (*manomayakoṣa*). The intellect with its faculty of determination and the same sensory organs make up the intellect sheath (*vijñānamayakoṣa*).

The bliss sheath (*ānandamayakoṣa*) is composed of the causal substance which manifests joy by the *vrtis* (mental movements) of joy and its latent faculties. As the Self identifies itself with the sheaths, it assumes their natures.<sup>24</sup>

One should note here that the concept of three instead of two bodies has been elaborated. The connections between the bodies and the sheaths may be depicted thus:



The consideration of the causal body may, for the moment, be overlooked and attention may be focussed on the subtle-body, the mechanism through which, in Hinduism, the embodied soul, disembodied at death, proceeds to re-embody itself.<sup>25</sup>

At the moment of death the subtle-body (along with the causal on a tri-corporeal picture) leaves the gross-body and moves on to acquire another gross-body. The remarkable point is that although the descriptions of the subtle-body qua subtle-body are not very detailed, the parallels with what Raymond A. Moody has identified as the "spiritual body" are still striking.

#### 4. Characteristics of Subtle-Body

It needs to be carefully noted that like Moody's "spiritual body" "this body is *supposed to remain after death*, while the outer body is dissolved into its material elements. The thin or subtle-body, though *transparent or invisible*, is nevertheless accepted as material; and it is this Sūkshma-śarīra which is supposed to migrate after death from world to world, but, for the most part, *in an unconscious state*. It is not like a human body with *arms and legs*."<sup>26</sup>

It is clear that like Moody's "spiritual" body the "subtle" body survives death and is transparent and invisible. It perhaps has to be accepted as material in the sense that, as one of Dr. Moody's sources put it "it has a *density* to it."<sup>27</sup>

That the subtle-body, for the most part, remains in an unconscious state is difficult to square with Dr. Moody's evidence, unless by the unconscious state one implies the inability to recollect it once the soul has transmigrated. This, however, does not seem to be the intended meaning and the point calls for further examination.<sup>28</sup>

The subtle-body is described as "not like a human body with arms and legs." On this point Dr. Moody comments: "It is agreed that

24. Eliot Deutsch and J. A. B. van Buitenen, *A Source Book of Advaita Vedānta* (Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1971), p. 282.

25. Some scholars talk only of two bodies (see F. Max Müller, *Rāmākṛishna, His Life and Sayings* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1898), p. 88) but more properly three need to be spoken of (see Kenneth W. Morgan, ed., *The Religion of the Hindus* (New York: The Ronald Press Company, 1953), pp. 122-125).

26. F. Max Müller, *The Six Systems of Indian Philosophy*, p. 174, emphasis added.

27. Raymond A. Moody, Jr., *Op. Cit.*, p. 48; "...the spiritual body is nonetheless something" (*Ibid.*, p. 46).

28. Is this a reference to the "tunnel effect?" (see *Ibid.*, pp. 30-34, 81-82).

the spiritual body has a form or shape (sometimes a globular or an amorphous cloud, but also sometimes essentially the same shape as the physical body) and even parts (projections or surfaces) analogous to arms, legs, a head, etc."<sup>29</sup> It is clear that the evidence on the point is mixed, perhaps the limbs etc., exist as a potentiality and not as a constant physical actuality, as in the physical body.

It is clear, however, that though Dr. Moody's description of the "spiritual body" and the Hindu notion of the "subtle-body" are not mirror-images of each other,<sup>30</sup> it seems difficult not to recognize elements of the one in the other to such an extent as to suggest that this parallel needs to be taken into account as seriously as the Biblical, Platonic, Tibetan and Swedenborgian ones.

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29. Raymond A. Moody, Jr., *Op. Cit.*, p. 46.

30. Another point of difference is suggested by the fact that while some of Dr. Moody's sources saw themselves re-entering the body through the head (*Ibid.*, p. 83) the Upanishadic accounts seem to emphasize the heart (see Paul Deussen, *Op. Cit.*, p. 286 ff).