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## The Last 10 Seconds of Eternity

Heaven, All Ways

*It is impossible that anything so natural, so necessary, and so universal as death, should ever have been designed by Providence as an evil to mankind.*

-- Swift

From the peak of the evolutionary pyramid we survey the world from more perspectives than any other being in creation. And yet the very act of our creation sets in motion a relentless progression leading to our deconstruction. We will all die someday. It's an edge we don't peer over very often even in speculation. It remains an abstract concept for anybody reading this because the term "death experience" is an oxymoron. Experience ends with death, which makes experiential information difficult to obtain and more difficult to prove. We are like a band of travelers who don't want to discuss our destination because it's impolite or something. We know the answer. Every single day we spend here is another day in a lifelong trek to our death. From birth we trace an arc, tossed up into the living for a time. But even as we loft into life, our destiny is determined. Life, it seems, has a catch to it. There is an end to it. Eventually we must touch down, and we hope the catch is gentle. Gravity is still master, the grave our final home.

As children we think nothing of it. We're too absorbed in a vital present to imagine a finite future. As we grow older we begin to notice mortality and before long we know that we are not everlasting. Long before we understand the certainty of our temporary existence we pray that God will take us into heaven when we die. Wherever that is. Whenever that is. As adults, we interpret it all to the young, trying to explain the reasons behind the experience of life. But when it comes to something as universal as dying, we are still like children. We know where Santa Claus gets the toys and where the Easter Bunny gets the baskets but most of us still hope that if we die before we wake, we trust the Lord our soul to take. Even the most rational among us usually agree that when it comes to that inevitable, ultimate, and final transition, God only knows what happens then. For many more, avoidance is the best refuge against a disturbing realization. As world population grows we notice more people dying all the time. It's clearly more than a trend. So, we keep our minds fixed on the here and now, rather than the where and when. We live all our lives, and then . . . and then . . . will the heavenly odds-maker collect the bets and the first person to the other side please tell us what happened? Am I Brahman? A spirit? An angel? Did Jesus love me? Did I miss Nirvana and what? Returned as a turtle for some Buddhist sin? Are these the Elysian Fields, the Happy Hunting Grounds, or - wrong turn - doggy heaven for Rover? The more we think about it the more we realize how undefined this most inevitable of destinations remains. We know more about the moon than death and very few have gone to the moon. All who went, however, returned and that's the difference. The moon is a temporary destination. Death is forever.

Where or how we spend that forever remains a bothersome unanswered question for a lot of us. This is an innocence we keep throughout life with much guesswork and very few authorities. We cannot speak with authority ourselves and those with real expertise have nothing to say at all. Dead men tell no tales. Still, as most of us prefer something to nothing, we accept various versions of the life or lives everlasting as described in traditional religious or spiritual beliefs. Those who find a path they can trust

know the peace of the mighty and the comfort of the meek. As we grow older we begin to understand we all want it. If truth were told nearly all non-believers would love to have a reason to believe.

## **Uncommon Destinations: Traditional Views of Heaven and Hell**

In comparing the afterlives of the world's great traditions there are many similarities. At first, singing in angelic Christian choirs and exiting Buddha's wheel of life seem far removed from each other. And yet there is the same ultimate peace. There is a journey, or return, to a higher and better existence where the pains and repetitions of life on this earth are left behind. We find a new existence in a new universe, an eternal place without end. That is as long as we're believers. Living in the cross-cultural currents of our global society it is hard to realize that less than a hundred years ago, wherever we lived we were either a believer or an infidel. Today, although fundamentalist sects of major world religions still bar non-believers from their heavens, most thinking people would agree Gandhi was working on the same wavelength as Mother Teresa and allow for cultural variations. This was unthinkable a century ago when major world religions were more geographically centered. So what about death and the beyond?

Most religions share a general consensus about a number of stages. At some point of time between when we stop breathing and when we start coming apart, the non-physical part of us (soul, mind, spirit, atman, etc.) leaves for another place. Our mortal bodies, created at the same time as this eternal part or housing it during this life, proceed to compost. Our soul, spirit, mind, being, etc., continues to exist in a mindful if disincorporated fashion as it starts a journey onward. There may be an initial purging, depending on what we did during our life on earth. The Purgatory of Roman Catholicism has its similarities to the Tibetan's mid-way Bar-do world between lives. Swedenborgian theology prescribes doing time in a spirit world to refine us enough to experience God full-strength. It's important to note it seems we cannot stay in any of these places indefinitely. Whether time in a purgatory or a few extra lives

to clean up the karma, sooner or later we progress. This is for ordinary people of course. True saints go directly to the good place and real evildoers get the trapdoor to the bad place.

Then comes judgment. Our deeds are totaled, our purgations accounted for, and we are assigned to a much longer stay somewhere else. If we are now acceptable, we go to heaven or Brahman or Nirvana or Amitabha's Pure Lands and stay there forever. If not, back to purging, more lives, or worse. Most eventually reach a nice eternity, which comes in nearly every variety depending on the time, culture, and nature of the writer. Fortunately most of us don't read outside our own traditions. A Catholic who showed up in the heaven of the Shin Buddhists, rebirth in the Pure Lands, would probably assume Franciscans had taken charge of eternity in this merciful agrarian paradise. The displeasure of a Viking waking up in Hebrew Sheol, a very sober place, when death in battle entitled him to the eternal fraternity party of Valhalla would not be printable here. Mormons enshrine marriage on earth so in Mormon heaven you keep your mate. A blessed Muslim male, however, can meet dozens of beautiful women in male-oriented Islamic bliss. Serious Christians sing alleluias as joyous celibates. Celibate old Himalayan monks could find themselves reborn in the "God realm" as minor tantric deities in eternal union with appropriate female consorts complete with four arms, lotus, prayer beads, and a yak-tail fly whisk.

Hell, likewise, seems to vary about as much as we insist on a literal interpretation of the Holy Word. In the hot lands of the Middle East, birthplace of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, cool is heavenly so hell was hotter than blazes. Ironically, the word "hell" is taken from the Norse underworld, an abode locked in everlasting snow and ice. They would have loved some heat in original Hell, where frost giants stalked and cold was the killer. Buddhist scriptures describe both hot and cold hells, further subdivided by Tibetans into picturesque categories and names such as "Ah-choo," an endless cold in the nose. This may be why orthodox Taoists borrow Buddhist heavens but prefer Taoist hells. Jains have the most hells, exactly 8.4

million, but the Muslim Jahannam seems to be precisely the same place as the Hebrew hell Gehenna, a truly hellish prospect for any evil Arab.

The reason that hell is still not the final judgment is that all hells seem to have a back door to them. A really bad Buddhist will simply be recycled in rebirth after rebirth until the karma is all gone, no matter how long it takes. Christians have until the very last moment to make peace with God. Even if an evil unfortunate ends up in the place with the pitchforks, the message of Christ promises forgiveness whenever true repentance appears. Since the Second Vatican Council this last chance option has been official for Catholics but it's been Hindu faith forever. Even the most sinful swami could return only so many times as a Calcutta street beggar before getting back on the straight track to Shiva after a while. It's just the trip that is longer and rougher for some than it is for others. Since most, if not all, of unpleasant detours are apparently incurred or avoided by the manner in which we live this present life, religious teachers provide insights and methods useful not only to us now, but able to transport us to a good eternity without too many intermediate stops in those unpleasant places. In fact, one of the ways by which we can distinguish one religion from another is by its afterlife. The great saints speak similar wisdom but the Pope and the Dalai Lama have distinctly different retirement homes when their good works are done. The reward of Christianity is instant heaven while the enlightened Bodhisattva is recycled for future lives spent helping others. This is eternal, either way.

Once the journey is over, we spend the rest of forever in the nicest place imaginable. Theologians write of everlasting oneness. Those with more vivid imaginations have for centuries expounded on the unspeakable, ineffable, glorious, indescribable and so on last stop. It's always our eternal home. It's always just what we wanted. Like "happy", heaven seems the same to all peoples and still very personal to each of us. Death, not life, is the event that unites us all and yet still it separates us to such different and personal places. We all die, we all take that final journey, but regional religions still tend to determine our

personal beliefs and faithful expectations. Those without faith suspect such expectations are pure romance but most of us still hope to arrive at the destination our cultural religious faith has always promised. The explanations may come in many languages but they all seem to describe the same experiences. Different guides report scenery appropriate to their custom and culture but they all cover the same territory and come to the same place when earthly time stops and eternity begins. The promise is always fulfilled - by God, by Allah, by Dharma or the T'ao. The steps are so regular and consecutive they suggest a common heavenly blueprint. Might there be a basic, underlying pathway to the beyond? Again the possibility arises. If this is such a universal human experience, could we be looking at brain states again? So far, the neural process itself seems to answer most of the questions that appear to be human rather than cultural. What happens at death must be the grand-daddy of them all, the biggest question in the mind of mankind. Is it answerable?

The real problem is that although we are all promised appropriate afterlives, no scripture explains just how we shift over to this timeless universe that appears only when we are dead and gone. None of us come with a shop manual to describe how we can accomplish this leap to immortality given the only tools at hand: our old, sick, dying mortal selves. These days, most of us don't like to believe in magic. If it's really possible to go to heaven it's time we came up with an explanation that makes some sense. Now that modern medical technology seems to be able to keep any of us, or for that matter any part of us, alive nearly indefinitely there is a renewed interest in just what happens afterward. No one in recent history has died and returned to life, and nobody yet has been known to survive brain death. We do have, however, volumes of reports from those who got close enough to stick a toe across and beat it back before too late. By reviewing available information we begin to get a picture of death that may help guide us towards the explanations we seek.

The physical requirements for human consciousness are simple, absolutely quantifiable, and they were listed in Chapter 2. Our brain requires 3.3 ml. of oxygen for every 100 grams of mass per minute and

a blood glucose level of 80-120 mg per 100 ml. It must eliminate waste toxins and it requires the correct blood pressure. Every aspect of brain function has precise requirements and limitations. We can't survive ten minutes without oxygen. Anything seriously interrupting blood flow stops everything. The result in every case is brain coma, a normally irreversible unconsciousness preceding brain death. Almost all of us will lapse into brain coma before we die. Not surprisingly, each year a few bounce back without serious brain damage and describe the experiences they had. A number of survivors of these near-death experiences were cataloged for similarities by Dr. Kenneth Ring, one of the first physicians to conduct serious research into the phenomena. Placed in the order they were perceived, these reports suggest a series of common experiences. Subjects reported "peace and contentment" (60%), "detachment from the physical body" (37%), "entering the darkness" (23%), "seeing the light" (16%), and "entering the light" (11%).

Since most patients suffering the sorts of trauma experienced by this group do not recover, survival ratios would favor those who experienced only the first stages of brain coma. The low percent reporting "entering the light" is probably because most of those who get that far don't survive. Along with these near-death revival stories there are the last words of those who died describing their final visions, often leaving poignant images of a place beyond. Interestingly, these visions are almost uniformly pleasant and often include parents or other relatives and friends who had died before. Finally, there are the descriptions from skilled Indian swamis and Tibetan meditation masters. These adepts seem to have held onto their minds fiercely through their last few moments, reporting everything they were experiencing until even they fell silent.

There are many common themes: a miraculous transformation, leaving the physical body, heavenly beings, a bright light, and a final peaceful merging. Only the details seem to be cultural. Nirvana never arrives for a devout Dominican nun. Holy Hindus drop their bodies and achieve final samadhi but they never meet Mother Mary. It is our own life that we experience, our own relatives who greet us along the

way. Left unanswered is how we can greet our grandparents if they are off with their own grandparents, the “paradox of the infant grannies.” Holy books seem strangely incomplete. The inevitable crowds of Chinese in paradise are not mentioned in any Christian biblical text. Even heavenly angels meet cultural expectations; wings for Christians, non-winged for Hindus. Heaven is always a curious combination of human universals and cultural specifics. As all human cultures have religions, it seems likely that experiences predicted by all religions might be common to human consciousness. As the same images appear both in the sayings of revered prophets and from first-hand reports of near-death, or “clinical death” and revival, it suggests there might be a neurological explanation for it. Saviors and prophets have always been able to tell us where we went after death. It appears science may finally be ready to provide a reasonable explanation of how we actually get there.

## **Welcome Home: Return To Eternity**

So what happens at death? If you have been reading this book chapter by chapter, at this point the nature of the experience of death may be apparent already. If we once spent forever winding up the mental clock that ticks us through time and space, the endless time between conception and the age of three, it would take just as long to wind it down. From a strictly medical point of view the brain will begin to suffer permanent damage at normal temperature after ten minutes without its support systems. Still, even during normal human brain death the major organs systems supporting the brain couldn't instantly collapse all at once. In other words, even if we wanted we couldn't just pull the plug on consciousness. The human brain at the point of death has billions of functioning neurons. Each is different. Each is alive. As death arrives they cannot all suddenly die at the same moment. That would be impossible. They die off over some period of time and their more sensitive functions go first. From the most sensitive dendrites, the most exposed

cortical cells to the most embedded neurons in the brain stem, the brain dies by degrees. Our chips unplug one by one as our mental networks simplify around us.

Since it is the activity of the human brain that permits and limits our awareness of anything else, how will our awareness change as the brain changes during the time of death? Unless the brain is suddenly destroyed, the stages of brain death cannot vary very much from one person to another. We have known many forms of consciousness since our unborn days when our brain was a fraction of its current mass or complexity. We're bound to lose our more recent mental capabilities long before we reach any final end. It must simplify in a somewhat predictable progression. As our brain dies our mind will gently unwind.

Before death we will fall into irreversible brain coma. Brain coma, however, is not by any means the end. It is the end of this worldly consciousness yes, but also the beginning of a return to an earlier form of consciousness and an earlier universe. During sleep, for instance, normal waking consciousness does not operate as the brain goes through its necessary rest and recreation, exercising some functions while letting others doze. We have all had the morning dream that seemed to last hours, only to waken and discover we had been asleep only few minutes. When our time sequencing structures in the prefrontal cortex are off-line, dreams can pack months into a few moments. Experiencing an eternal afterlife, it appears, may be a lot simpler than we thought. If we pull the switch on time itself, we will have plenty of time for any special effects to come later.

Harvard researcher Alan Hobson believes our dreams are neither Freudian films nor mystical guides. They're simply artifacts created when higher brain centers are stimulated with irregular bursts of neural static from the brain stem during sleep. Emotional states aroused in this manner take visual form but since the prefrontal structures are taking a nap, chronological time and abstraction are off-line and unavailable. The most remarkable thing about dreams is the ability to alter a scene seamlessly, so that one can return to one's childhood home and see it aged correctly even though the house itself may have ceased to exist. The

mind can easily “morph” any image, allowing us to float or even fly in a dream by creating visual transforms of scenery as if seen from a height or unusual perspectives such as floating over our own body.

This is a small example of how an “unconscious” mind can experience a consciousness quite unattached to worldly perception. The important difference is that dream images must be synthesized internally from our own memories. Nobody else can get into our heads really, so all dream people and their actions have to be fashioned from our own recollections. A dream scenario is a perfect example of a temporary timeless virtual reality we experience completely by ourselves, without help from external powers, spiritual or temporal. Although dreams are populated with beings, human and otherwise, they have their origin in our own memory, altered temporarily to meet the demands of a dream plot. They cannot be original, speak new lines, or unveil anything beyond our own imagination. They are, in fact, ourselves, our versions of images, people, and places; a fully functioning one person universe that seems to operate quite well.

In nearly all forms of death, consciousness will go unconscious before death arrives. This means that we can still be aware, unconscious but in a dream-like state even as the brain dies, cells winking out at random, axons sending their final messages, dendrites reacting, failing, and finally falling silent. The actual experience of the simplification of our brain will be perceived as the gradual simplification of our mind over a period of time which will seem endless. As our neural nets unravel, we gradually return to the final eternity of the undifferentiated mind that we knew since we were created, and long before we were born. The progressive stages of brain death specifically responsible for the near-death experiences reported by Ring’s subjects have been known for some time. They were first collected and put into general order by Canadian neurosurgeon Leslie Ivan.

The brain starts to die as the delicate balance of its blood chemistry begins to change. Usually something interferes with blood oxygenation and as oxygen levels drop, neural firing rate begins to

decrease. This is what tranquilizers do, and it creates the pleasant dreamy “peace and contentment” felt by so many near death. The buildup of carbon dioxide and other toxins in the blood start to create distortions in cortical firing patterns, while deep in the limbic system, specific endorphin receptors begin to react to the falling oxygen levels. Generalized physical sensations, dissociation from the body, and even euphoria begin to occur. At about the same time, the visual cortex begins to fail, along with structures in the prefrontal cortex. Our sense of time and space begin dissolve, bending us gently back toward our beginnings.

As memories and emotions are released from the controls of time, ancient images from the past flow into a consciousness that is no longer either exact or discriminating. These are the same endorphins we remember from our birth as we begin to retrace our ancient path. Soon, either blood loss or changes in blood chemistry have progressed so that brain cells are beginning to die at random. The visual cortex is a sophisticated structure near the surface of the brain. It is especially vulnerable. As neurons die from the periphery to the center, the image of a tunnel of light begins to form in the mind. Visual memory patterns start to lose definition and fade as nerve cells disconnect and misfire. The inhibitory rule structures of our virtual reality continue to crash as uncontrolled neural hyperactivity calls up vivid images and timeless dream sequences from random static. As the visual cortex continues to simplify, the color scale begins to alter and dissolve back to the earliest color we knew, back to a primeval deep red. It’s not the fires of hell, but an endless sunset that finally fades to the familiar darkness we knew from the very beginning, long before our own dawning, before we were born.

The darkness begins to surround us. Beyond the red sunset, there remains the dull glow. Consciousness is quickly losing the last edge of specific definition as the continued destruction of the neural networks increases. The last fits and flashes illuminate the great ocean of darkness with pinpoints of blazing energy, the stars, the lights we see as we head into our new-old universe. We are among the stars now and we begin to move toward the distant light. That light is the last signal of all, when all signals from

this universe have faded into the starry night. Like our last call from this earth, our failing reality filter, the dying reticular activating system., surges, yanking consciousness tight for a final moment. We sign our own names in this universe for the last time and return to our final home. When we get there, we will enter the light and become the light. We know where we are going on our last journey because we came this way before. Now we return.

Each of us will, in time, one at a time, join in this final shared experience. We must travel together with the mind that made us as the weave is gently unwoven. As our brain, the great analyzer and discriminator, moves moment by moment to the final and ultimate simplicity of one last living cell, we are moving with it. We will never know that it is we that are simplifying. A simpler mind cannot know concepts that require a brain no longer capable of discriminating thought. We are now moving backward into ancient memories we could never recall on earth, from a much simpler time. We are returning to the other universe we know, the universe we always knew, our old eternal home. Where do we make our transcendent ascension? Probably between our disassociation from the body and the light, which is as far as has been reported. The most detailed reports we have come from highly trained Tibetan lamas whose last words were filled with specific descriptions of the stages in the dissolution of their worldly consciousness. The sequence, as described by the Venerable Lati Rinpoche and Jeffrey Hopkins of the University of Virginia, even includes changes in the color of the sky as one begins the final journey into the Bar-do, the “gone-beyond.”

The dream sky at the beginning of death is initially bright white. White is the mixture of all colors at equal intensity. It’s a good description of how the background will appear in early brain coma when the visual cortex starts to disinhibit. We imagine the color of all colors simply because the visual controls aren’t working. It’s the classic blank screen; the computer is still on but nothing is happening. As the prefrontal cortex begins to go timeless we lose all visual definition and the sky slowly fades to red; the

lowest color in the human visual color spectrum. It is also the earliest color we knew. According to the Tibetans, we then see “points of light, like sparks.” The brain’s video card is nearly gone. Finally there comes darkness and the “setting face to face with the clear light of death.” We are returning to the universe we knew before birth. Back when we were the only known universe, the only one we’d ever known. We have a lot of brain left, but we are now as timeless and as sightless as our seventh month in the womb. We are the one and only again, this time forever. Scientists prefer independent verification for theories that consciousness may still be perceiving cogently while the brain is simplifying during death. Without a single scanner and the most rudimentary knowledge of brain science the lamas had been describing in sequence the gradual death of the brain while the event was actually in progress. They never went beyond the “clear light of death” in their lucid descriptions. By that time they had stopped talking and “gone beyond” to the most profound and universal state of mind we will ever encounter in our lives. In the final return to our own beginning the circle is completed for each of us. From eternity to eternity, and all conveniently in one lifetime.

This does seem to be our path; but what is our personal experience? It is probably a blessed event, as gently reassuring as our birth was once so bewildering moments ago. With timelessness fast approaching, our lifetime will seem a short vacation, almost a dream, in some barely-recalled other world. As discrimination falters we begin to remember forever and see again the sights we saw when we had just arrived from where we are now returning. Tall beings greet us, past lives unravel in endless eons of our own infancies. There are rounds of judgment, followed by rounds of forgiveness as long forgotten years of our deepest past return. Years appear now between the minutes of earthly time, centuries between seconds, even more between the tenths of seconds. Finally, as was promised by God or our own faith, we are returned to oneness forever. Had there ever been anything else? By then, we cannot perceive anything else. By that time we are eternally reconciled, as the heart, the mind, the soul, and the universe all merge in the

journey back to one, the journey that can never end. Eternity arrives early. It comes with our final consciousness, just a few minutes before final brain death. We will never be able to perceive death itself. We'll run out of time and self long before it gets to us. The final catch is gentle indeed. We have nothing at all to worry about. We all go home in the end to the timelessness of another universe that remembers nothing and is forever.

Although this gradual simplification of consciousness agrees with information we have from the scientific community it must remain speculative. Final confirmation remains impossible because of the nature of cellular life. There is a threshold below which a dying cell is dead and unrevivable. Anything which would take consciousness to a unified, timeless state would probably kill off so many brain cells in the process we may as well stay there. If revived, we would suffer from hopeless brain damage, trapped in a body completely inappropriate to our mental state. When faced with the question of removing life support from the brain dead, Pope Pius XII suggested in irreversible coma the soul may have already left the body. It appears he was right, and in even suggesting it he demonstrated how easily religion can incorporate rigorous neurological perspective as a backup for wisdom that was always available. "If science can prove something exists even if Buddhist teachings deny its existence, we should seriously consider revising the teachings." said the Dalai Lama in 1997. If we can experience endless lifetimes without erecting multiple universes, why not? Ockham's razor works for Asian monks too. Still, the final proof will always be missing. Our best witnesses leave us before it's over.

Among the living, then, we can have no trustworthy reporters. Brains and minds in the midst of organization towards complexity are in the heads of people too young to speak and still unable to reason. Likewise, dying people end with their dying words. We never hear about their final destination. The Book of the Dead must still be read on faith, but it seems not an unreasonable hope to expect eternity. In fact, there seems no way to avoid it. Due to time distortions which must occur as we lose chronological control

there is no way to know how long it takes to regress a soul back to eternity. Brain cells are capable of firing dozens of times in a second. We could slow down to a graceful forever in the blink of an eye. By the time we reach our own place, time will have stopped for each of us.

## **Living Well and Dying Right**

Death is usually gentle, but most traumatic deaths still could not prevent consciousness from going timeless. There would be a swifter transfer to earthly unconsciousness and brain coma but then our comfortable and steady return to eternity would begin. Many victims of shootings, stabbings, car accidents or massive loss of blood slide into unconsciousness first, and quickly into their final journey without further pain or problems. Common diseases such as cancer, heart attacks, or failures of major organ systems would seem nearly guaranteed to launch us smoothly toward paradise. Should a boulder drop on our head, however, there might be no death dream experience at all. We would be eternally in the moment before it happened because in a fraction of a second, less time than it takes to get another frame ready in the visual cortex, all perception would suddenly disappear. Neural impulses travel at about 80 miles per hour. Anything hitting us going faster than that take us to forever faster than we know what happened. We simply remain in the moment before we never saw it coming. We wouldn't miss heaven; in fact we wouldn't miss anything at all. As long as we didn't see it coming.

This brings us to one variety of death that should at all cost be avoided: the violent destruction of the brain while in a disrupted mental state such as panic, pain, misery, or terror. In such an instance, regression could not occur and eternity would be the last consciousness available. Facing the gun that blows your head away or frozen with terror in an injured aircraft that has not gone instantly to pieces are versions of the worst death of all. For those unable to calm their own minds either by religious faith or powerful meditative ability, eternity is dismal. Every religion in the world has its ghosts. They are without exception described

as disconnected souls of those who died a violent death. There was no last option out. For those who ask “What about Hitler?” they have their answer. Most of his victims went to heaven, but by shooting himself in the head, he probably made it impossible for himself. There can be no easy exit in a brain blown to pieces during a suicidal depression.

## **Karma and Compassion: Why It’s Good to Be Good**

There is a natural justice in the way it seems to work out. If our regression into timelessness is within our own mind, it is within a closed system. Any road to heaven must be paved with our own good intentions or at least the memories from a life spent that way. At the start of death we leave the open system, the world around us, and enter the closed system that exists only within us. Now our only reality is our virtual reality and we must live in the world of images we made ourselves. Any recognizable heavenly or hellish scenarios will be mental constructions arising from our dying networks, just as we made earlier dream images from memories when the forebrain took a nap and time was “off.” This time we will join with the dream. We shall not wake again to the world of troubles or pain. We are already long gone beyond that place. From a neurological perspective, this self-made aspect of our death scenarios provides impetus for ethical behavior as convincing as any religion currently practiced on earth. In doing so, it also provides a rationale for living a good and decent life that is as tempting and certainly as believable as any promise of any happy rebirth, heaven, or after-life.

It has already been demonstrated that we cannot have any actual reality in our minds, just our virtual reality, our personal perception. At birth, and for our first three years, the constant change in the growing brain prevents the repetition of memory that characterizes the mature brain. It is only as we start to create and extend larger networks through repetition they become extensive enough to survive the distortions of early brain death. Infants who die in the womb, soon after birth from birth defects, or even during infancy

would naturally have an easy return to timeless oneness. There would be little repeated experiential detail to disturb a smooth regression to the original mind. However, for most of us, by the time we die we have a lifetime of memories to draw on.

One thing is clear. The endless path we take during death may be outside the bounds of normal time and space but it begins inside our heads only after our normal senses have shut down. The outside world ceases to exist, leaving us only images from past personal experience. Whatever we had been doing in life, we are stopped and sent packing to eternity with whatever we have packed in our memories up to that moment. This can be nice for those with minds filled with a life rich with kindness and simple pleasures. If we spend a lot of time worrying or stressed, however, there could be roomfuls of blues to endure on our way to wherever after. In the first part of our death experience, everything will be happening at once and forever but it's all ultimately derived from our own past. We are creating our eventual eternity every day of our lives. It is really something to think about.

This thoroughly scientific viewpoint does not repudiate the words of the saints, saviors, and prophets of the Western religions. It only substantiates the truth of their wisdom when it comes to how to live this life with respect to the afterlife. Clearly our struggle with this chaotic world, both internal and external, sends too many towards a life of selfishness and misery on earth and sheer hell afterward. If we listen to the words of Jesus and live a life as He taught, if we study the Torah and live by the laws of the God of Israel, or if we read the Koran and live in the light of Allah through the writings of his Prophet, we will have very little to worry about later. If we make life hard for ourselves and others, we'll take the long and hard way home. It's simply inevitable any way we look at it. A Christian, Muslim, or Jew can use these insights as the best scientific proof yet that every practicing Christian, Jew, and Muslim will certainly go to heaven when they die.

Asian religions as well, being systematic in nature, take naturally to the systems of natural law, science, and neurology. From an Asian perspective, what actually happened at any point in our lives will never be as important as what our state of mind was. “He Ram!” “Praise God” cried Ghandi as he was shot, dying with the name of God on his lips. If we spend a lot of time being hopeful, helpful, kind, generous, supportive and reliable, we should have very nice “endless lifetimes” on the way to our final Samadhi, Satori, Brahman, or Nirvana. If we spend a lot of time angry, depressed, selfish, irritable, or withholding, these may be the only backdrops available when the mind takes us timeless. The last few seconds of our death will seem to be so much longer than our entire life on earth that we would do well to consider it every day.

It’s also an up-to-date explanation for the “law of karma”. The concept of karma in Asian philosophy speaks directly to the accumulation of neural networks that bias reality and delay enlightenment. Karma is created only with intention, which requires conscious attention. Intention to do good produces “good karma” and intending to harm creates “bad karma.” Stepping on a bug we never saw would create no karma but looking for a bug to step on would create very bad karma. Tibetan lama Thupten Kalsang, even in his forties, spoke with anguish of the day when as an eight year old child monk he once deliberately squashed a flea. With his training, he could never forget it. Giving to the poor creates good karma while working for pay is no karma. It is where our mind was at the time that makes all the difference. Conscious intention focuses our mind, creating deeper memories we re-encounter during death and we never know where one might show up. In that sort of chaos, memories can merge backward with other events and we could find ourselves being squashed by a huge flea in an extended time frame. Once neural destruction starts, entropy takes over and God only knows what images will arise during the first stages of forever. Even the immediate cause of our death will not have as much to do with our death experience as our general state of mind leading up to it. There are forms of suicide which are gentle, but

religions universally argue against self destructive acts. Moods which lead to suicide, even for terrorists who blow themselves up for a cause, build up over time. They are deep feelings of helplessness, pain, and rage which would not be fun to relive for eternity. Depression and anger may pass, but our trip to forever never ends. It could be hellish if we don't work it out before we leave. Our human lifetime is the one and only chance we have to make sure any future lifetimes will be the nice everlasting even if it all takes place during death.

Our eventual return to the timeless state of our basic, formless mind agrees nicely with aspects of Asian teaching which declare we won't reach Nirvana or Brahman until all our karma is exhausted. Whether we spend "endless lifetimes" in timeless scenarios based on a good and virtuous life or in various hells and scare shows derived from unpleasant memories, we still cannot reach the really final places until the brain has so simplified that our neural networks can't sense any images at all. In fact, eternity with specifics must be just the first part of the experience. This unusual time and space of "forever first and more later" is made possible because we are no longer using sequential time. It helps explain Lord Bhairab's endless lifetimes express back in Benares as well as Jesus Christ's description of the life everlasting. We can do eternity in a moment once we turn off time. By the time we reach true brain stem consciousness we shall all be reconciled but we must still reach that final union with God and the Great Mother along the path we made ourselves during our one and only life on earth. The final judgments on the way will be only what we deserve and just rewards are provided to those who have every reason to expect them. It's fortunate we have lots of advice on how to get to the good place without a scratch. The best bet, quoting John Wesley, is to "Do all the good you can, in every way you can, to whomsoever you can, at any time you can, just as long as ever you can." He died in his eighties from pneumonia contracted riding hours through bad weather to minister to a sick friend living at a distance. He is probably enjoying endlessly the love he gave and received all his life. Doing good to others always makes us feel good in the present tense,

and it's nice to know it's piling up even better dividends for an endless future that always comes sooner than expected. We can bank on that.

### **The Universal Journey: Light unto Light**

Luckily, when we take a good look back at our lives most of us are not dissatisfied. The great majority of us, therefore, can look forward to experiencing the blessed miracle of losing our perception of earthly time and the discrimination of comparative thought in one smooth curve down to our last living moment. The beauty of this elegant process, described medically as normal brain death, is that we will find ourselves lost in timelessness before we get halfway to the end, and it will take forever to get us even that far. This very personal regression to the infinite is reminiscent of equally unworldly phenomena at quite the opposite end of the size scale. In astronomy we have learned about stellar objects known as "black holes". They can be seen only as dots of utter darkness. A collapsed star in the center has shrunken to a point so dense that its gravity lets nothing at all, even light, escape from its surface. There is an imaginary ring in space around such a black hole, referred to as the Schwartzchild radius or the "event horizon." This is the outer limit of a swirling gravitational vortex, the dark whirlpool that can seize anything at all, and whirl it into that darkness forever. Observing an object in space, if it were to slip over an event horizon it would not disappear immediately from our sight. As it approached the rim the vortex starts to suck in any light. Massive gravitational waves surge through it, creating distortions in time and space as it begins an endless spiral to the invisible center. To an observer, it seems to reach the event horizon and stop in place as it slowly fades away. The moment it went over the edge there was nothing left but the old image. Everything else has already gone beyond, beyond human imagination, beyond even the laws of science, forever. If it were you there, friends watching from earth would see you disappear slowly at the edge of darkness rather like the Cheshire Cat, perhaps with a last smile while, surrounded in your own light, in another time and

space you are disappearing into the center of brightness, in final perfect union with perfect union itself, the completely compressed brilliant matter of the primeval universe. Nothing returns from that journey. Even stars wink out when they meet the event horizon. They are going to where we cannot follow, over the edge of darkness to the city of light.

Death as we watch it seems very much the same. We see our loved ones simply posed, as they were poised a moment ago, in their last visible form in this universe while in another, deeper reality they have already started toward a true and timeless light. We on the outside could see eons pass before their journey will end or that light could fail. They are moving now into the timeless eternity that we left so long ago and the journey will take them just about forever and not a moment less. The universe finally unfolds itself for us again in a profound return like the return of the tide that sweeps us finally into the endless sea. It makes no difference whether it takes five days or five minutes or five seconds. Time will stop for each of us. As our memories simplify, we are greeted and accepted and passed backward into places of greater and greater love. For who did not love us as infants? Back we spiral as days, months, centuries appear between the moments of earthly time. We start to circle endlessly into the center of the only universe we knew, our everlasting light, our welcome home. Suns, moons, stars; all can come and go many times and that light will never fail.

We have never been that far away from eternity; we carry it with us all our years. It finally comes for us when it is time for time to transcend again in the clear light of death. We have our time here and much to do and then we will return home again. We never expected most of what has come to us so far in this life but this is one thing we can almost surely count on if we have any faith in reason and basic neuroanatomy. The religious already celebrate this promise through their chosen faith, since, allowing for cultural and historical variations they come to nearly identical conclusions. The great prophets of the past used legend and poetry to teach us how to live well and how to die well. We have so much more power in this age of

science that it is important to know the best science we have tells the same story. We have nothing at all to fear.

We are born from eternity into the heart of love. We are each absolutely unique and ultimately universal. We are each of us now, and each of us is forever. Christian, Muslim, and Jew can praise the God of Abraham for giving us such a blessed system as well as a Prophet and a Savior to show us just how to use it. Hindu, Buddhist and Taoist can appreciate a neuro-dharma with ease. Karma is conserved, Nirvana is nearby, and flowing with the T'ao seems to take us naturally to the stars. We become once; and we can never unbecome. We all experience life until we experience death and it is death itself that will take us on our own endless journey to that expected and appointed meeting with eternity. We are now; and we are forever. We can bet on that with statistical probability, from everlasting to everlasting for sure. Our story will not be repeated, but it's a happy ending. We can have faith in that and every reason to believe.