

Near Death Experiences (NDEs) and their Relationships to Yoga

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To the title, one might respond: “There’s a relationship between Near Death Experiences and yoga!?”

Firstly, when I say “yoga”, I do not mean the Western definition, which focuses mainly on physical poses. Rather, I mean the original Eastern definition of yoga, which is often translated from Sanskrit as “union.” In the East, yoga is a holistic philosophy of life, not just a physical practice. In this paper, I will show the relationships between this Eastern philosophy of yoga and the reports of those who have visited the other side of the veil -- via Near Death Experiences -- and returned to the tell their stories.

What led me here? In September of 2024, I watched a YouTube video about someone who had an NDE. I immediately knew that the speaker was telling the truth. Everything he said came from his heart. I could sense it. Watching the video was a very key part of a spiritual awakening that I was going through at the time. A few months later, I experienced an inner knowing (some might say “a calling”) that I should start yoga teacher training. I did not know why exactly; I just knew that was what I was supposed to do. Over the next few months, it became clear to me why.

I had been practicing western style yoga (asanas) for about 13 years at that point. I had practiced yoga as has been popularized here in America, mostly as a series of poses, but with some breath work thrown in here and there. The first thing I recognized was a relationship between savasana in yoga and meditation. At that point I had no idea that meditation was the fundamental aspect of yoga, as traditionally practiced. Nor was I aware of the profound experiences that meditators often have. Nor did I know about the ultimate goal of meditation: enlightenment (or self-actualization). Over the following months, I studied the 8 Limbs of Yoga as part of series at a local yoga studio. Then, as part of my Yoga Teacher Training, I read 3 key ancient texts: the Bhagavad Gita, The Upanishads, and the Yoga Sutras.

Once I had read and studied those, everything started to come together. I began to understand that meditation could lead to profound experiences and self-realization. I started to understand the ancient teachings about karma and re-incarnation. I made the following links between NDEs and yoga:

1. Out of Body Experiences and the Astral Plane
2. Visions of White Light, Tunnel of Light, Illumination, or Auras
3. Life Review and Reincarnation
4. All are One, Sense of Cosmic Unity, Love

There are associations between NDEs and most other spiritual or religious traditions. I believe there is great overlap between many faith systems. However, my path led me to down this route. The associations between yoga and NDEs are quite strong. Indeed, there are more associations than I had time to cover in this paper. That said, I take no offense if you find no harmony with my conclusions. I encourage the reader to find their own path and their own conclusions that work for them. For my paper, I researched in detail these common features between yoga and NDEs, to substantiate my own hypotheses. Below is that research.

Out of Body Experiences

According to researcher Jody A. Long, the definition of a near death experience (NDE) is “a lucid experience associated with perceived consciousness apart from the body occurring at the time of actual or threatened imminent death.” (Jody A. Long J.)

Many people who reach deep states of meditations also have out of body experiences. Meditation is an intentional exercise as opposed to the NDE, but the experience is similar. The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali describes the 8 limbs of yoga. The last 4 limbs are the withdrawal of the senses, concentration, meditation, and samadhi (a profound experience of oneness with everything). During deep meditative states, a yogi’s consciousness can escape the body, thus the yogi has an out of body experience (Patanajali). Yogananda describes his own out of body experiences in *Autobiography of a Yogi*. He mentions feelings of floating, expanding, and awareness of being nothing but light (Yogananda, 1946).

Also, in *Autobiography of a Yogi*, Yogananda recounts his guru Sri Yukteswar’s description of life after death on the astral planes. Yukteswar, speaking from an astral realm, explained that there are myriad astral worlds inhabited by souls who have left the earth. He described astral cities and societies, beautiful astral landscapes of luminous light, and vibrational regions allocated for souls of different spiritual qualities (Yogananda, 1946). This aligns with the accounts of many NDErs, who see beautiful cities, colors, forests, and other natural vistas in their out of body experience. Yogic interpretation would hold that NDEs are given a peek into realms of the astral plane where souls embark after death, with the specific locale depending on the person’s state of mind and karma.

The Upanishads state that whatever one’s predominant thoughts at the time of death will shape the next destination, as the soul is carried “to the world thought of” at life’s end (Upanishads). This could explain the often culturally colored imagery in NDEs (for example, a Christian may see Jesus, a Hindu may see various deities). Yogic philosophy suggests that the mind creates or is drawn to a fitting experience in the intermediate state, consistent with one’s deep beliefs or yearnings.

Western scientific thought assumes that consciousness is an emergent property of the physical brain. This model lacks any concept of a subtle body or that consciousness is actually fundamental, so Western thought struggles to explain Out of Body Experiences (OBEs), such as people while “dead” witnessing specific details from the operating room or even from places outside of the operating room, such as the waiting area. In yogic philosophy, consciousness is not seen as an emergent property of the brain, but as the fundamental reality (Atman or Purusha) that exists independently of the physical body. The Bhagavad Gita uses the analogy: “*As a person puts on new garments, giving up old ones, the soul similarly accepts new material bodies, giving up the old and useless ones.*” (Bhagavad Gita). Also, the Upanishads describe the Annamaya Kosha (or physical body) as separate from the more subtle bodies, which are energetic and mental in nature. (Upanishads)

Ultimately, yogic philosophy sees the brain not as the producer of consciousness, but as a limiting filter. In an NDE, when the normal brain activity shuts down, consciousness is freed from its filters, potentially expanding into a clearer perception of reality. Many NDErs report their understanding becoming clear and senses exponentially sharper after they were “dead,” which is paradoxical under a materialist view but expected in a consciousness-based view.

Visions of White Light, Tunnel of Light, Illumination, or Auras

In yogic physiology, the body contains Prana (life-force), Tejas (radiance), and Ojas (spiritual strength). Highly developed yogis may exhibit visible luminosity, described as a halo or aura of light. This is not symbolic – it's linked to the refinement of subtle energies and the purification of mind and heart (Ramacharaka, 1903-1904). NDErs often enter a radiant realm of loving light that communicates directly with them. Moody's *Life After Life* identifies "golden light" and "being of light" communication in many NDE. (Moody, 1975)

NDErs often go through a tunnel of light before reaching a realm of clarity, peace, and oneness. One can draw an analogy to between that tunnel of light and kundalini rising through the spine. The Shandilya Upanishad and Yoga Kundalini Upanishad explain that when kundalini rises to the upper chakras, particularly the Ajna (third eye) and the Sahasrara (crown chakra), visions of intense light, divine beings, and inner unity often occur (Upanishads).

Life Review and Reincarnation

A profound component of many NDEs is the panoramic life review. People describe witnessing every action of their life, often feeling the effects on others as if experiencing those events from the other persons' perspectives, or from a higher vantage point. They report that in this review there is no external judgment – rather, they simply understand with great clarity what was in harmony with love and what was not.

Beyond a current life review, many NDErs re-experience previous lives. 60% of 196 participants in the Wittmann led study reported experiencing past events. Of these, many experienced previous lives (Marc Wittmann, 2017). This is phenomenal because in Western society, reincarnation is not part of our culture or mainstream religious beliefs. Yet so many westerners who have an NDE report re-experiencing previous lives.

Some quotes about life reviews from NDErs:

"NO JUDGMENT OTHER THAN HOW I FELT ABOUT THE INCIDENT." - BOB A.

'FEAR IS AT THE CORE OF OUR MISTAKES.' - SHEILA

"WHAT HAVE YOU DONE TO HELP YOUR FELLOW MAN?" - SUSAN

'I SAW HOW MY ACTIONS RIPPLED THROUGH THE LIVES OF OTHERS.' - DEE

(Jody A. Long J. , Life Review, Changed Beliefs, Universal Order and Purpose, and the Near-Death Experience, Part 4 Soulmates, n.d.)

YOGA SUTRAS 3.18: "SAMSKĀRA-SĀKṢĀTKARANĀT PŪVAJĀTI-JÑĀNAM"

“THROUGH DIRECT PERCEPTION OF SUBLIMINAL IMPRESSIONS, KNOWLEDGE OF PREVIOUS BIRTHS IS GAINED.”

(Patanajali)

As stated earlier and bears repeating here, the Bhagavad Gita uses a classic metaphor: just as a person discards old garments and puts on new ones, the soul (embodied consciousness) similarly casts off an old body at death and dons a new one (Bhagavad Gita).

NDErs report that there was no judgment from an external being during a life review, but rather the life review was a way for them to learn how their actions affected others. From a yogic perspective, the life review serves an educational purpose for the soul. It is an encounter with the law of karma – not administered by some external judge, but by the soul’s own higher consciousness. Experiencing the effects of one’s actions on others may be a way of resolving karma by internalizing the moral lessons, thereby leveling up the soul for either liberation or another incarnation.

Judy Long of the NDE Research Foundation states: “According to what NDErs report in the life review, most say we are learning the lessons of cause/effect of our actions on others. The way we interpret the cause and effect on others is by looking at how we feel about the actions and can feel others emotional reactions to our initial actions. The top three answers to universal purpose had to do with our life cycle on earth as part of a continual, natural process in the evolution of the soul and that we were to love and help one another.” (Jody A. Long J. , Soulmates 2003, Part 5, 2003)

Indeed, these life reviews have a profound effect. Many NDErs return radically transformed, letting go of past grudges and trivial pursuits. Many experiencers lose their fear of death entirely and live with renewed purpose to love and serve – essentially embracing values found in the yogic paths of Jnana (knowledge), Bhakti (devotion), and Karma (selfless action), as described in the Bhagavad Gita.

Union, Oneness, Love

According to a ResearchGate study, about 70% of NDErs report encountering a special Light and Unconditional Love, along with a sense of Oneness (Tressoldi & Long, 2023)

According to Kevin Williams, an independent researcher who blogs about NDE experiences, “Many NDErs describe an overwhelming sense of love that transcends human understanding. They often report meeting a “Being of Light” or a divine figure, which they interpret as God or a higher power, radiating unconditional love. This love is described not just as feeling loved but as an intrinsic part of the entity’s nature, suggesting that at the core, unconditional love is God. People from different religious backgrounds — Christians, atheists, Hindus, Muslims, and others — who have had NDEs often return with the same core insight: that love is the most important truth. This points to love as a universal spiritual principle, rather than a doctrine specific to any one religion.” (Williams, 2025)

Williams continues, “In my own NDE research, intense feelings of unconditional love is the number one most common characteristic found in NDEs. The highest percentage of NDEs that reported overwhelming love was those categorized as Christians (75%) and atheists (75%)... Overwhelming love was experienced in (69%) of all NDEs.” (Williams, 2025)

According to NDE research by Judy A. Long, “our universal purpose is to learn to love ourselves and to love one another. By properly learning this lesson on earth, we are able to reconnect with the universal stream of consciousness, otherwise known as God/Jesus/Supreme Being. It appears that we may be separated from the other side as a mechanism to exercise free will. This is not inherently a good or an evil process; It simply is what it is. Only by being removed from the environment of total love and knowledge, could we be motivated to grow by learning to reconnect to the universal stream of consciousness.” (Jody A. Long J. , Soulmates 2003, Part 5, 2003).

Long also states: “A natural by-product of learning to love ourselves and others is reconnecting with the other side. Through exercising the choice to love, we grow precisely from our exposure to a world filled with dualities. This type of soul-growth opportunity does not exist on the other side where there is total love, knowledge, and understanding.” (Jody A. Long J. , Life Review, Changed Beliefs, Universal Order and Purpose, and the Near-Death Experience, Part 4 Soulmates, n.d.).

The Bhagavad Gita defines Yoga as Union. The ultimate purpose of life is to re-discover Union, once we have learned to love ourselves and others along the way. Samadhi, the most advanced stage of meditation, and the key aspect of the 8 limbs of yoga, experientially shows that we all are one, and that one is love. This is the same lesson that many NDErs return with.

A common feature of NDEs is the feeling of being told or deciding that one must “go back” to life, sometimes because one’s work or lessons on earth are not complete. Yogic philosophy would interpret this as karma (every action has a reaction that must be completed) and dharma (one’s duty).

According to Judy A. Long, “So, when looking at the karmic, dharmic, and twin flame theories of Soulmates, we see that there is a grain of truth. We continue to struggle with family, significant others, work, and with our views of God, until we can reconcile erroneous belief systems with our true nature by exercising love for all. As bleak as life may seem sometimes, there are people there who are purposely sprinkled along our path to help us achieve reconnection with God - they are dharmic connections that help keep us balanced.” (Jody A. Long J. , Soulmates 2003, Part 5, 2003)

BG 6.29: “A YOGI SEES ALL BEINGS AS EQUAL IN SORROW AND JOY, BECAUSE HE SEES THE SELF IN ALL BEINGS.” (Bhagavad Gita)

BG 6.30: “HE WHO SEES ME IN ALL BEINGS AND ALL BEINGS IN ME IS NEVER LOST TO ME, NOR AM I EVER LOST TO HIM.” (Bhagavad Gita)

ISHA UPANISHAD (VERSE 6): “HE WHO SEES ALL BEINGS IN THE SELF, AND THE SELF IN ALL BEINGS, NEVER TURNS AWAY FROM IT.” (Upanishads)

CHANDOGYA UPANISHAD 6.8.7: “TAT TVAM ASI” (THAT THOU ART) — CLASSIC AFFIRMATION OF ONENESS. (Upanishads)

Linda Johnsen, author, describes Ananda (Bliss) of the Self – Anandamaya Kosha experience in relationship to NDEs:

THE NDER IS IMMERSSED IN UNCONDITIONAL LOVE, PEACE, AND A SENSE OF UNITY. THIS IS PRECISELY THE QUALITY OF THE BLISS SHEATH, THE SUBTLEST BODY THAT IS “THE THIN VEIL BETWEEN

INDIVIDUAL AWARENESS AND THE SUPREME SELF. ” EXPERIENCING THE “BRILLIANT WHITE LIGHT OF ALL-EMBRACING LOVE” CORRESPONDS TO TOUCHING THE ANANDAMAYA KOSHA. ”
(Johnsen, n.d.)

Conclusion

What I find compelling about yoga is that it offers not only ethical guidance – through the Yamas and Niyamas – for living in harmony with others, but it also offers practical tools such as breathwork, movement, and meditation to help individuals gain mastery over the mind and access higher states of consciousness. These higher states of consciousness can lead to experiences similar to those reported in near-death situations. Yoga tradition maintains that this earthly experience is “maya” – typically translated as “illusion.” NDErs and people achieving higher states of consciousness, through yoga or other means, get a peek beyond this veil of illusion. What they report back is that what they saw is vastly more real and vivid than what we experience here on earth through our human body.

The conclusion is that we are much more than our bodies. We are, in fact, consciousness, and that consciousness exists outside of the physical body. It transcends time and space. And most importantly, most NDErs return with the conviction that love is the most important thing. We are here to learn to love ourselves and to love each other. In fact, many NDErs say that love is the only thing that matters and that it ultimately is the only thing we take from this world to the great beyond. Indeed, the Bhagavad Gita teaches a similar lesson: “He who has no ill will to any being, who is friendly and compassionate, free from egoism, and even-minded in pain and pleasure, and forgiving — such a devotee is dear to Me.” The Mundaka Upanishad states: “He who knows this Supreme Brahman becomes very loving. His heart expands in all directions.” It is profound to realize that every major spiritual and faith tradition, not just yoga, teaches this universal truth: the importance of love.

While our bodies and mind are limited, we need not die to experience love or to raise our level of consciousness. We have that within our ability now. Yoga offers the wisdom and the tools to help us achieve these goals!

Namaste!

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