



## Explanation of Near-Death Experience from the Perspective of Advaita Philosophy and Buddhist Philosophy

Dr. Suman Acharjee

<sup>1</sup> Assistant Professor (English), Central Sanskrit University, Ekalavya Campus,  
Lembucherra, Tripura (W), India  
Email: [sumanacharjee20@gmail.com](mailto:sumanacharjee20@gmail.com)

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### Abstract

Near-death experiences (NDEs) are profound psychological and existential events reported by individuals who come close to death or experience life-threatening situations. Common features include out-of-body experiences, encounters with luminous beings, life review, and a deep sense of peace. While modern neuroscience attempts to explain these phenomena through brain activity, philosophical traditions offer deeper interpretive frameworks. This paper examines NDEs through the lenses of Advaita Vedānta and Buddhist philosophy. Advaita Vedānta interprets such experiences as glimpses of Brahman, the ultimate non-dual reality, where the individual self (Ātman) realizes its unity with universal consciousness. In contrast, Buddhist philosophy, particularly Theravāda and Mahāyāna traditions, denies the existence of a permanent self and explains NDEs as conditioned mental phenomena shaped by karma, saṃskāras, and dependent origination. Through a comparative analysis, the paper highlights that while Advaita emphasizes metaphysical unity and transcendence of ignorance, Buddhism focuses on impermanence, non-self, and the constructed nature of experience. Both perspectives offer valuable insights into the nature of consciousness and human experience at the threshold of death. This study contributes to interdisciplinary discussions by integrating philosophical interpretations with experiential reports, thereby enriching our understanding of consciousness, selfhood, and ultimate reality.

**Keywords:** Near-death experience, Advaita Vedānta, Buddhism, consciousness, non-dualism

## Introduction

*As the Bhagavadgita states, "The unreal never is; the real never is not," indicating a deeper reality beyond ordinary perception.*

Near-death experiences (NDEs) have intrigued scholars, philosophers, and medical practitioners for decades. These experiences, often reported by individuals who have come close to death, include vivid perceptions such as leaving the physical body, traveling through a tunnel, encountering a bright light, and experiencing profound peace. While scientific explanations often attribute these phenomena to neurochemical processes, philosophical traditions provide deeper metaphysical interpretations.

In Indian philosophy, Advaita Vedānta and Buddhism offer two distinct yet profound perspectives on consciousness and reality. These traditions not only address the nature of self and existence but also provide interpretive frameworks for extraordinary experiences like NDEs. This paper explores how these two traditions explain NDEs and what insights they offer into the nature of consciousness.

## Phenomenology of Near-Death Experiences

*Raymond Moody observed that "Many people described a sensation of peace and separation from the physical body," a recurring feature in NDE narratives.*

NDEs share several common features across cultures. Individuals frequently report out-of-body experiences (OBEs), where they perceive themselves as separate from their physical bodies. This is often followed by movement through a tunnel or void, culminating in an encounter with a radiant light or spiritual presence.

Another significant feature is the life review, where individuals relive past actions and experiences in a vivid and emotionally intense manner. These experiences often result in long-lasting psychological transformations, including reduced fear of death and increased

compassion.

Such consistent patterns raise important philosophical questions about whether consciousness can exist independently of the body and whether these experiences reveal deeper aspects of reality.

## Advaita Vedānta Perspective

*The Upanishadic mahāvākya "Tat Tvam Asi" ("That Thou Art") directly supports the Advaitic understanding of unity between Ātman and Brahman.*

Advaita Vedānta, systematized by Ādi Śaṅkarācārya, posits that Brahman is the ultimate, non-dual reality. The individual self (Ātman) is identical with Brahman, but this truth is obscured by ignorance (avidyā). The Upanishads declare, "Tat Tvam Asi" (That Thou Art), emphasizing this identity.

From this perspective, NDEs may represent temporary dissolution of the ego and transcendence of ignorance. The experience of light and unity reported in NDEs aligns with descriptions of Brahman as pure consciousness and bliss. Śaṅkara's famous statement, "Brahman alone is real; the world is illusory," further supports the idea that such experiences reveal the underlying reality beyond sensory perception.

Thus, Advaita interprets NDEs as glimpses into the true nature of existence, where the apparent separation between self and universe dissolves.

## Buddhist Philosophical Perspective

*Walpola Rahula explains, "What we call a being or an individual is only a combination of ever-changing physical and mental forces."*

In contrast to Advaita, Buddhism rejects the notion of a permanent self (anātman). According to Buddhist teachings, what we call the self is a collection of five aggregates (skandhas) that are constantly changing.

Consciousness is seen as a stream of momentary events conditioned by karma and dependent origination (pratityasamutpāda).

The Dhammapada states, "All phenomena are preceded by the mind," highlighting the role of mental processes in shaping experience. From this perspective, NDEs are not glimpses of an ultimate self but manifestations of conditioned consciousness under extreme conditions.

Tibetan Buddhism introduces the concept of the bardo, an intermediate state between death and rebirth, where individuals may experience vivid visions. These experiences are understood as projections of the mind, influenced by past actions and mental habits.

### Comparative Analysis

*Bruce Greyson notes that "Near-death experiences often transform attitudes toward life and death," showing their lasting existential impact.*

While both Advaita Vedānta and Buddhism acknowledge the profundity of altered states of consciousness, their interpretations differ fundamentally. Advaita affirms an eternal, unchanging self-identical with Brahman, whereas Buddhism denies any permanent self and emphasizes impermanence.

In the context of NDEs, Advaita sees these experiences as revealing ultimate reality, while Buddhism interprets them as mental constructs shaped by karma. Despite these differences, both traditions agree that ordinary perception is limited and that deeper insights into reality are possible through altered states of consciousness.

This comparative perspective enriches our understanding of NDEs by highlighting both metaphysical and phenomenological dimensions.

### Conclusion

*Swami Prabhavananda writes, "When the mind is stilled, the Self shines in its own*

*glory," reflecting the transcendental interpretation of consciousness.*

Near-death experiences challenge conventional understandings of consciousness and selfhood. Through the lenses of Advaita Vedānta and Buddhist philosophy, these experiences can be interpreted in profoundly different yet complementary ways.

Advaita offers a vision of ultimate unity and transcendence, while Buddhism provides a dynamic, process-oriented account of consciousness. Together, these perspectives deepen our philosophical engagement with the mystery of NDEs and contribute to broader discussions on the nature of reality and human existence. But the point to be considered is that the analogical experiences like Out of Body Experiences (OBEs), tunnel like experience, sense of ultimate peace, seeing bright light etc. can't be claimed as pure manifestations of samskara or karma or earthly experiences. And it is from here the role of Advaita philosophy seems relevant in explaining all these experiences beyond science.

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