

A Comparative Analysis of Japanese and Western NDEs

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ABSTRACT: Decades of studies on near-death experiences (NDEs) have revealed both cross-cultural and culture-specific features (Kellehear, 2009) and that it is important to determine which aspects are attributed to the physiological, biological, or psychological mechanisms shared by all humans and which aspects are of cultural origin. In this article, we examine Japanese NDEs and compare their features with generalizations based on observations of Western NDEs. The main differences between Japanese and Western NDEs are the interpretation of the light and the concomitant lack of interaction with it, the image of heaven, and the absence of the life review. We suggest that these characteristics are accounted for in terms of cultural differences.

KEY WORDS: Japanese near-death experiences, cultural factors, love, light, image of heaven, life review

In this article, we present an analysis of Japanese near-death experiences (NDEs) with reference to features of NDEs identified by Moody (1975, 1977) as commonly occurring in Western NDEs. We identify both similarities and differences in elements between NDEs from the two cultures and discuss these findings with reference to experiencers' cultural backgrounds.

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Method

Our first step in comparing Japanese and Western NDEs was to analyze cases of Japanese NDEs with reference to the 15 NDE elements that Moody (1975) originally identified as well as the four elements he (1977) subsequently added (cf. Greyson, 1983, 2003, 2014; Pacciolla, 1996; Sabom, 1982; Schwaninger, Eisenberg, Schechtman, & Weiss, 2002; Zingrone & Alvarado, 2009). Our goal was to determine how many of Moody's elements were present in Japanese NDEs.

NDEs in medieval Japan were discussed by Becker (1984) and McClenon (1991, 1994). However, we will not in this paper present a systematic analysis of these older cases but will limit our discussion to studies of contemporary Japanese NDEs, such as those of Iwasaki (2011, 2013), Tachibana (2000), and Yamamura (1998). Analysis of the total of 273 cases provided in these studies revealed reference to only some of the 19 elements that Moody (1975, 1977) had identified. We could not be sure that lack of reference to the remaining elements indicated the actual absence of those elements in the experiences themselves or merely the authors' exclusion of reference to elements that actually had been present. Therefore, we turned our focus to 22 interviews of experiencers that Tachibana Takashi (2003) had conducted. We considered these interviews an ideal source for a content analysis of Japanese NDEs because (a) the interviewer was a highly skilled journalist, asking appropriate questions to clarify vague points that would otherwise have remained vague; (b) the interviews were published in full with minimum editing; and (c) none of the interviewees were anonymous, which gives more credibility to their reports. We did not include in our analysis the remaining one interview in Tachibana's study because it was a series of hallucinatory experiences occurring to a sailor adrift at sea for 27 days; Tachibana had included it to demonstrate how different such hallucinatory experiences are from NDEs (Tachibana, 2003, p. 72).

Of the 22 experiencers, 14 were men, and 8 were women. Out of 21 cases in which age at NDE was reported, in two cases, a range of ages was reported, specifically 8–9 and 17–18 years old. In these cases, we used the younger age (i.e., 8 and 17 years, respectively) in our analysis. Thus, for the 22 cases, mean age at time of NDE was 39.5 years ($SD = 20.5$), and median was 36.0 (range = 8–78).

Table 1 *Elements Observed in Japanese NDEs*

| Element | Number of cases |
|---|-----------------|
| Occurring during the NDE | |
| Ineffability | 3 |
| Hearing oneself pronounced dead | 3 |
| Feelings of peace and quiet | 10 |
| Hearing unusual noises | 1 |
| Seeing a dark tunnel | 1 |
| Being “out of the body” | 4 |
| Meeting “spiritual beings” | 13 |
| A bright light | 3 |
| Panoramic life review | 0 |
| A realm in which all knowledge exists | 1 |
| Experiencing a heavenly place | 16 |
| A realm of bewildered spirits | 0 |
| Experiencing a “supernatural rescue” | 0 |
| Sensing a border or limit | 12 |
| Coming back “into the body” | 0 |
| Occurring as NDE aftereffects | |
| Frustration relating the experience to others | 1 |
| Subtle “broadening and deepening” of life | 13 |
| Elimination of fear of death | 13 |
| Corroboration of events witnesses while “out of the body” | 2 |

Note. N = 22.

Results

Similarities Between Japanese and Western NDEs

Results of the content analysis of these 22 NDEs are shown in Table 1. The wordings used to refer to the 19 elements in Table 1 are from Greyson (2014, p. 335), who summarized Moody’s (1975, 1977) analysis, with the following two exceptions. First, the 8th element, “a bright light,” was followed by the expression “as a ‘being of light’” in Greyson (2014). In Table 1, however, we omitted this qualification because, in Japanese NDEs, experiencers did not seem to sense any personality in the bright light that appeared to be comparable to the “being of light”

in Western NDEs. Second, the 11th element, “experiencing a heavenly place,” was termed “experiencing cities of light” in Greyson (2014). The expression of “cities of light” is meant to refer to a heavenly place. The image of such a place may be “a city of light” to many Westerners, but it is not necessarily so to Japanese. For this reason, we replaced “a city of light” with “a heavenly place.” We will discuss these alterations in more detail in the next section.

Only one experiencer referred in his interview to the 10th element, “a realm in which all knowledge exists,” and his reference was only an implication, possibly because of a lack of time to give a detailed report. However, this experiencer later wrote a book about his NDE in which he discussed in detail the presence of this element (Kiuchi, 2003). Of the four elements that were not found in our Tachibana (2003) database, “panoramic life review” was reported by one of 14 experiencers that Yamamura (1998) had investigated, and “coming back ‘into the body’” was reported by one of the 12 experiencers that Iwasaki (2011) had investigated.

Those results left two elements missing in Japanese NDE reports: “a realm of bewildered spirits” and “experiencing a ‘supernatural rescue.’” Note that Moody (1975), in his first 150 cases, did not identify these elements but that following publication of his first book, many more cases came to his attention, and these two elements were among those he (1977) subsequently added. Moody’s process in this regard suggests that these elements may be less frequently reported even in Western NDEs. Taking into consideration the relatively small number of Japanese NDEs that researchers have so far analyzed, it may be that future investigators will eventually find these two elements in Japanese NDEs, as well.

To summarize, we found almost all the elements observed in Western NDEs to have been present also in Japanese NDEs. Thus, Japanese NDEs appear to be phenomenologically very similar to Western NDEs.

Differences Between Japanese and Western NDEs

In the preceding section, we noted that we had made two modifications to the terminology concerning the 19 elements observed in NDEs, both of which reflected differences between Japanese and Western NDEs. Following is a more detailed discussion of these two elements as well as one additional.

Characteristics of the bright light. The first and most important difference we found was the interpretation of “a bright light” that experiencers encountered during their NDEs. Regarding this NDE element, Moody (1975) wrote:

What is perhaps the most incredible common element in the accounts I have studied, and is certainly the element which has the most profound effect upon the individual, is the encounter with a very bright light. Typically, at its first appearance this light is dim, but it rapidly gets brighter until it reaches an unearthly brilliance. Yet, even though this light (usually said to be white or “clear”) is of an indescribable brilliance, many make the specific point that it does not in any way hurt their eyes, or dazzle them, or keep them from seeing other things around them (perhaps because at this point they don’t have physical “eyes” to be dazzled).

Despite the light’s unusual manifestation, however, not one person has expressed any doubt whatsoever that it was a being, a being of light. Not only that, it is a personal being. It has a very definite personality. The love and the warmth which emanate from this being to the dying person are utterly beyond words, and he feels completely surrounded by it and taken up in it, completely at ease and accepted in the presence of this being. He senses an irresistible magnetic attraction to this light. He is ineluctably drawn to it. (pp. 49–50)

We compared this description to the narratives of Japanese experiencers whose NDEs included the element of a bright light. Following are those three narratives.

Yasuda, a musician and an actor, contrasted a strong, bright light he met in his NDE with stage lights he was familiar with in his profession: “First of all, the nature of the light is quite different. It was much, much brighter than stage lights. Yet it is not blinding [it does not hurt my eyes?]. Stage lights are blinding” (Tachibana, 2003, p. 27). He also claimed that he felt ineffably happy as he was walking in the light.

Shiga, a critic, moved through a seven-colored light column and reached a place like “a lawn, or flower garden, fluffy and very soft as if made of cotton” (Tachibana, 2003, p. 58). He described his feelings during the experience:

I have never felt such a good feeling. I can’t compare it with any other experiences. It was like going to heaven or the feeling of ecstasy. I was perfectly content. I didn’t want anything. Like I was 100 percent content. Nobody will understand how I felt until they experience themselves. (Tachibana, 2003, pp. 60)

Ms. Mukai, a non-fiction writer, met a colorful, unforgettably beautiful butterfly emitting bright light. Embraced in the bright light, she “was in total sweet euphoria” (Tachibana, 2003, p. 90).

Because of the bright light’s otherworldly nature and the ineffably euphoric feelings the Japanese experiencers felt during their encounters with it, “the bright light” that Moody (1975) described appears to be essentially the same as the light the three Japanese experiencers encountered. Interestingly, however, none of these experiencers interpreted the light as having a personality. This feature is in contrast with Western experiencers, among whom those with religious backgrounds often interpret it as a religious figure such as God, Christ, or an angel, whereas those without religious beliefs tend to identify it simply as “a being of light” (Moody 1975). Related to a lack of personification of the bright light in Japanese NDEs is the concomitant lack of communication with the light and the lack of the specific sense of being loved, which is a profoundly important feature in Western NDEs (cf. Ellis 2007, 2012).

The lack of these characteristics in Japanese NDE reports had already been observed by Tachibana (2000, vol 2., pp. 80–93), who analyzed 243 Japanese NDEs from heterogeneous sources. He admitted, however, that the reliability of his analysis was not very high because only about 15 of these cases had been investigated in detail. Tachibana suggested that elements lacking in Japanese NDEs but pervasive in Western NDEs—personification of the bright light, a sense of being loved, and communication with the light—are cultural artifacts influenced by the Christian tradition. He pointed out that the “God is Light” motif is deeply rooted in the Christian tradition (cf. the Bible, 1 John 1:5) and influences the interpretation of “the bright light” encountered in NDEs. This personification of “the bright light” as God and the tradition of receiving messages from Him may encourage NDErs’ interpretation that they have communicated with “the light.”

The lack of personification in Japanese NDEs also may be related to the relatively low rate of religiosity in Japan. According to the 2006–2008 Gallup survey (Crabtree & Pelham, 2009), among 143 countries, Japan is the 8th least religious, with only 25% of people answering “yes” to the question, “Is religion an important part of your daily life?” By contrast, in the U.S., where most studies of Western NDEs occurred, 65% answered “yes” to the same question (Newport, 2009).

The sense of being loved in Western NDEs may be related to another established motif of “God is love” in the Christian tradition (cf. the Bible, 1 John 4:8, 4:16b). This motif may lead experiencers to in-

terpret the ineffably euphoric feelings as “love” emitted from God or a divine source.

We should point out that the apparent lack of the sense of being loved in Japanese NDEs might also be due to the Japanese tendency not to express the feeling of love verbally. In a discussion of the difficulties in translating English into Japanese, between Odajima Yuji, a Japanese theater critic, and Tsuka Kohei, one of Japan’s most important modern playwrights, Tsuka brought up a well-known episode about Natsume Soseki (1867–1916), a professor of English literature at the Tokyo Imperial University (now Tokyo University), who later became one of the best-known novelists in Japan (Odajima, 1978, pp. 236–237).

It is alleged that Natsume, as an English teacher, got angry with a student who translated the English sentence “I love you” into Japanese as “Aishiteru [I love you]”, because that expression is not in daily use among Japanese, and instructed him to translate it as something like “Tsuki ga totemo aoi kara [The moon is really blue].” Although the expression “Aishiteru [I love you],” which Natsume allegedly made students avoid using, is now widely accepted in literary works, most Japanese people still do not use it on a daily basis.

The scarce appearance of the word in daily conversation might reflect its complex etymology. “Ai [love]” is not a native Japanese word but rather a loan word from Chinese that was used to express various types of love. In the medieval period, the word came to have a negative connotation and was used to refer to earthly desires from which, in the Buddhist tradition, people should strive to free themselves. Only in the modern period have people come to use the word as a translation of the English “love” and begun again to use it to express various types of “love” (cf. Shogakkan Kokugo Jiten Henshubu, 2000–2001).

At least two pieces of evidence indicate that the personification and love characteristics of “the bright light” observed in Western NDEs are due to cultural background, as Tachibana (2000) suggested. First, as Becker (1984, 1992) pointed out, many reports of deathbed visions were written in Late Classical or Early Medieval Japan within the Pure Land Buddhist tradition, such as the *Konjaku Monogatari*, the *Nihon Ojo Gokurakuki*, and the *Fuso Ryakki*. In these accounts, a dying person, usually a monk, saw Buddha or related figures in the bright light; bright light was associated with divine figures but was not, itself, either personified or exuding love. Thus, though light is associated with divinity in both Western and Japanese cultures, whether it is interpreted as personified and loving or as neutral may

very well occur in accordance with the religious or cultural background of experiencers.

Second, at least two Japanese NDE reports contained the characteristics observed in Western NDEs: those of Suzuki (2005) and Iida (2006). In her NDE, Suzuki was surrounded by a very beautiful light unlike anything she had ever seen (Suzuki, 2005, 14–17). The light was very bright but was not dazzling. She felt that the light was life itself, with its own personality, and was connected and interacting with her at a deep level. She also felt that she was wholly known, understood, accepted, forgiven, and completely loved. She thought that this experience was the ultimate love. From that light, she received a message: “When you go back to the earth, the most important things are to study and to love. Only these two are important” (p. 17). Suzuki, a university professor, is a long-time sister of the Society of the Sacred Heart, and her Western-type NDE is in accord with her Catholic background.

Iida, during an episode of brain hemorrhage, had an NDE in which he also met a very bright light (Iida, 2006, pp. 71–94). He was surprised by its astonishingly high frequency vibration, describing it as the ultimate light, and felt that if he had seen it with his physical eyes, he would not have been able to open them. He had a long dialogue with the light, asking questions and receiving answers. The ultimate message he received from the light was: “The only valuable thing in life is to study, to love, and to try to fulfill your mission,” which, interestingly, overlaps the ultimate message Suzuki received in her NDE. Iida did not say explicitly that he felt the sense of being loved by the ultimate light.

Iida also was a university professor who, at the time of his NDE, had previously published a number of books on spirituality, one of which introduced various paranormal phenomena including NDEs. His profound knowledge about NDEs and other spiritual phenomena accords with his profound NDE. Iida did not commit to any specific religion, and the lack of the sense of being loved in his NDE might be due to the lack of the “God is love” motif in his mind.

These considerations seem to suggest that (a) personification of the bright light, (b) a sense of being loved, and (c) communication with the light are not universal but rather culture-specific features.

Image of heaven. A second difference between Japanese and Western NDEs concerns the image of heaven. As already stated in the preceding section, “cities of light” is not a typical image of heaven for

most Japanese people. The association of heaven with light in Western NDEs seems to be influenced by the Christian tradition, linked with the “God is light” motif. For instance, according to the Bible, as Saul approached Damascus on his journey, “suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him” (Acts 9:3), and God is referred to as “the Father of heavenly light” (1 James 1:17).” In contrast, the typical image of heaven for Japanese is a flower garden. Reflecting this distinction, of the 16 Japanese NDErs who reported seeing a heavenly place, 13 referred to the place as a flower garden, two as a white world, and the remaining one as a sky.

Related to these contrasting images of heaven is another difference between Japanese and Western NDEs: the description of a border or limit. As Moody (1975) pointed out, a border or limit appearing in NDEs takes various forms, such as “a body of water, a gray mist, a door, a fence across a field, or simply a line” (p. 65). The typical form appearing in Japanese NDEs is a river; the origin of this image was discussed by Onodorea (1994, 1995). Of the 12 Japanese reports in which a border or limit was mentioned, 10 referred to it as a river, one as a pond, and one as a stone wall. In contrast, the appearance of a river as a border or limit is much less common in Western NDEs: One of the authors (B.G.) found only nine references to the border as a river in his collection of about 700 NDE narratives.

Panoramic life review. Lastly, we would like to point out the possibility that the panoramic life review, although a common feature of Western NDEs, might not be a universal element of NDEs. In the tradition of Japanese Buddhism, it was widely believed that a dead spirit faces Enma-Daio, the king of the world of the dead, a figure that can be traced to Yamaraja or Yama in Hinduism (Iwasa, 1964; Matsuzaki, 1989). He is depicted as a horrifying figure who ruthlessly pronounces judgment upon the dead person depending on that person’s deeds in life. The dreadful image of Hell to which Enma-Daio sends the sinful was illustrated in many classical and medieval Japanese *Jigokuezu*—paintings of a scene in Hell. As Tachibana (2000) pointed out, NDE reports of the periods often included the encounter with Enma-Daio, but in contemporary Japan, where people no longer believe in the existence of Enma-Daio, a report of seeing Enma-Daio is almost non-existent—although Tachibana (2000) did report one rare case of a contemporary NDE involving Enma-Daio in an experiencer who had been a believer in that being.

With the demise of the sense of being judged by Enma-Daio, which

is directly linked to the overall loss of religiosity, the majority of Japanese people do not seem to think that their deeds in this world will be judged in the next world. This situation may very well contribute to the scarcity of panoramic life review in Japanese NDEs. As we reported above, there were no references in the 22 NDE reports by Tachibana that we examined; Yamamura (1998) reported one instance, but because he provided no narrative account of that NDE, we cannot know the depth of the experience. Thus, we attribute the absence of a life review in Japanese NDEs to the lack of an expectation by Japanese people in general that they will be judged after they die.

In contrast, the concept of the "Last Judgment" is one of the central doctrines in the Christian tradition. It seems that this religious or cultural background leads Western NDErs to experience a panoramic life review in which experiencers are not judged, *per se*, but do typically experience what other people felt who were on the receiving end of experiencers' actions throughout experiencers' lives—a form of self-judgment. This interpretation is supported by the absence of a panoramic life review in Indian NDEs reported in Pasricha (2008, p. 408; Pasricha & Stevenson, 1986). Although in Hinduism, karma is believed to affect people according to their deeds in previous lives, individuals do not believe they will be judged in the way Christians believe they will be judged after their deaths. In our interpretation, this unexpectedness of being judged after death leads to the lack of a panoramic life review in Indian NDEs. Kellehear (2009) also pointed out the absence of a panoramic life review in other non-Western NDEs; it would be worth examining the frequency of Christian-type last judgment in those cultures.

Conclusion

Pointing out that some of the prominent features in Western NDEs, such as the life review, have so far been absent in non-Western NDEs, Kellehear (2009, p. 135) emphasized the importance of exploring cultural factors more thoroughly before turning to biological factors. In this article we focused on Japanese NDEs, which were not included in Kellehear's (2009) cross-cultural studies, and we compared them to generalizations based on observations of Western NDEs. The main differences were the interpretation of the light and the concomitant lack of interaction with it, the image of heaven, and the lack of the life review. We suggest that these characteristics may be accounted for in terms of cultural backgrounds.

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*Unofficial Japanese-English translation offered by co-author Ohkado.

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