



**After: A Doctor Explores What Near-Death Experiences Reveal about Life and Beyond**

BRUCE GREYSON, MD

New York: St. Martin's Press, 2021. 258 pp., hardcover, \$28.99.

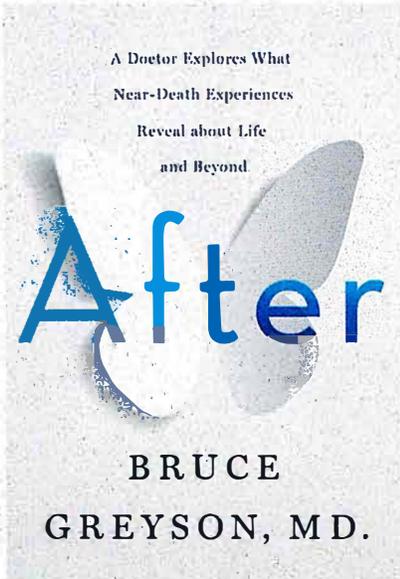
In this landmark book, Bruce Greyson, MD, one of the world's leading medical experts on near-death experiences (NDEs), presents us with the results of almost fifty years of scientific research into this phenomenon.

Greyson shares his long journey, which started with an inexplicable experience he had as a "newly minted psychiatrist" attending to a patient in the emergency room. The patient was unconscious during the whole period of his first visit, but when he returned the following day, she claimed to have seen him converse with her friend in the consultation room the previous evening; she also related some information about that meeting that she could not possibly have known by any ordinary means.

So began Greyson's interest in paranormal experiences reported by people on the threshold of death. These experiences challenged his scientific understanding of life, death, the brain, and consciousness. His curiosity, tempered by a strong skepticism and a scientist's need for proof, inspired a lifelong journey for answers, which he presents in this compelling book.

NDEs are profound experiences that occur on the threshold of death, which often include mystical or spiritual features. NDEs are common and have been reported since ancient times to today, occurring in 10–20 percent of all people who come close to death, or about 5 percent of the general population.

Skeptics have often written off such experiences as hallucinations, religious visions, or the result of mental illness. More recently, the medical and scientific community has been increasingly investigating these experiences in order to understand their implications about the nature of consciousness, the brain, death, and what, if anything, comes after.



Reports of remarkable experiences on the threshold of death (such as when the heart stops) can vary. Some near-death experiencers report seeing rare colors, while others hear strange sounds or have conversations with dead loved ones or out-of-body experiences. In any case, these people undergo profound transformations in their attitudes, beliefs, values, and behavior.

Greyson has studied over 1,000 experiencers and includes several of the most dramatic first-person accounts in this book. Part medical detective story and part journey of personal growth, *After* chronicles one doctor's skeptical inquiry over decades of clinical experience and scientific research as he reluctantly comes to grips with the facts about NDEs, their effects on his patients, and ultimately, how they shaped his own life's purpose.

This book explores questions that are fundamental to understanding the nature of NDEs, as well as implications that challenge some common assumptions about reality. Some of these questions are:

- How can we tell that NDEs are real?
- What do NDEs tell us about the mind-body connection?
- How can people's consciousness continue when their brain activity has stopped?
- Does consciousness continue after

death into an afterlife, such as heaven or hell?

- What about the nature and identity of the divine beings encountered by people who have NDEs?

In all of Greyson's thoughtful, honest, and rational exploration of these questions, the most striking takeaway for me was the tremendous lack of understanding by modern science regarding the nature of consciousness itself. Greyson is both humble enough and wise enough to acknowledge this fact. He approaches this mystery and engages the myriad of unanswered questions with a refreshing level of integrity.

Perhaps the greatest value of this book is the change that it may facilitate in the way we view and live life while we are still alive. As Greyson points out, "The evidence shows that near-death experiences transform the lives not only of people who have them and their loved ones, or the researchers who study them. NDEs can also transform those who read about them and can ultimately, I believe, even help us change the way we see and treat one another."

*After* inspires us to evaluate our understanding of life and death, but most importantly to reevaluate our own lives and ensure that we fill them with true meaning and joy. We can all do this even without having NDEs of our own.

John Cianciosi

John Cianciosi is director of programming for the Theosophical Society in America.

**Everyone's Book of the Dead: A Panoramic Compendium of Death and Dying: The After-Death States, Karma, and Reincarnation throughout World History**

TIM WYATT

Bingley, West Yorkshire, England: Firewheel Books/Leeds Theosophical Society, 2021. 226 pp., £31.

For Buddhists there is the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* to help one understand the process of life, death, and reincarnation. The ancient Egyptians had their own Book of the

Dead, containing funerary texts and magic spells to help the deceased navigate their journey through the underworld into the next life.

Now we have *Everyone's Book of the Dead*, providing a vast exploratory venture into the mysteries of death and reincarnation from the perspective of the Ageless Wisdom, most prominently Theosophy.

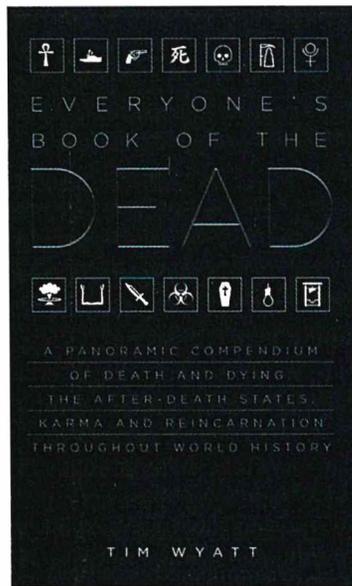
We in the West don't know how to die, which means we don't really know how to live. We live in fear of death; is that really living? "Learn to die so that you may learn to live," Wyatt quotes Thomas à Kempis, author of *The Imitation of Christ*, adding that we are not good at embracing the death event because "we have lost touch with the natural rhythms of life and death."

"Death is the greatest of earth's illusions," said Annie Besant in *The Ancient Wisdom*, just one of Wyatt's many quotes pulled from an array of Theosophical writings.

Materialism has influenced our reluctance to think about death and prepare the mind for this most personal and amazing of all our earthly experiences. By contrast, Theosophy, notes Wyatt, "offers a radically different view of ourselves, the wider world and the universe than can be easily found in any religion, science or philosophy."

Wyatt quotes many philosophers and Theosophists, including Besant, H.P. Blavatsky, William Q. Judge, and J. Krishnamurti, bringing to light their thoughts on death and dying as well as near-death experiences in order to demystify death for everyone instead of just those who profess a particular religion. After all, in much of today's society, religion doesn't mean what it once did, as surveys show that fewer people are affiliated with any religious organizations.

Perhaps many today are avoiding the dying process rather than death per se. But the process of dying too is a mystery. The *Tibetan Book of the Dead* has an entire section on the stages of the dying process, which was very helpful for me when Brent, my significant other, was dying of cancer at our



home. *Everyone's Book of the Dead* also contains a chapter on the process of dying. According to Wyatt, modern attitudes surrounding the dying process usually involve fear. We are so used to depending on medicine, surgery, and other modern remedies that death seems far away, if not impossible. "The majority of older people die under some form of medical supervision," writes Wyatt. "The last rites have been replaced by the last intervention or injection."

It would be helpful to learn a different way of looking at death. Wyatt suggests that we see it as "a Beginning—not an End . . . Transforming our attitudes to death would yield another bonus: it would inevitably mean that we also aggressively re-examine our ideas about disease—its real origins on the inner rather than the physical planes. Until we understand the deeper causes of disease—the karmic causes—we shall not be able to develop effective means to treat and manage it." He also stresses that we would be better off not to treat disease and death with a "militaristic mind-set . . . as an enemy to be fought and conquered."

Many obituaries state that the individual died "after a long battle" with a disease. My significant other warned me not to say that in his obituary: he never fought his cancer but embraced the path that was his to tread.

Wyatt's chapter on reincarnation

contains a statement with which I completely agree: "If a correct understanding of reincarnation became permanently embedded into the collective human mind-set the implications would utterly transform life on Earth—almost at a stroke."

Wyatt's exploration of death, dying, and reincarnation is made all the more enjoyable by the beautiful artwork, photographs, and layout of each page, which capture the imagination in a way that words alone cannot.

This is truly a book for Theosophists, and one I recommend sharing with family and friends. Dying is something we will experience (and likely have experienced), but it is not to be feared. As Brent told me shortly before he died, "Dying is easy. I thought it would be harder than this, but it's so easy."

Clare Goldsberry

Clare Goldsberry's latest book, *The Illusion of Life and Death*, will be published in 2021 by Monkfish.

### Think Least of Death: Spinoza on How to Live and How to Die

STEVEN NADLER

Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2020. 234 pp., hardcover, \$27.95.

Philosophers have explored the idea of freedom in their writings since the time of Plato, and the seventeenth-century Dutch-Jewish philosopher Baruch Spinoza was no different. The theme running through this latest commentary on Spinoza's *Ethics* specifically looks at how one can be a free person.

We all seek to be free, but few know what that entails. According to Steven Nadler, Spinoza's is an "inner freedom that consists in choosing to do what one knows is good and in one's own best interest . . . whereby one's thoughts, desires and choices (and ultimately one's actions) follow from one's own nature and not from the effects that other things have on one."

One important aspect of becoming a free person is *conatus*, the power of acting to persevere, which, Nadler