

Terence McKenna and Death

By Alexander Beiner & David Jay Brown

To follow is a short summary of the late ethnobotanist Terence McKenna's views on death. An excerpt from the interview that I did with Terence in 1989 is followed by Alexander Beiner's summary of a talk that Terence gave at the Esalen Institute in 1994.

David: Do you have any thoughts on what happens to human consciousness after biological death?

Terence: I've thought about it. When I think about it I feel like I'm on my own. The Logos doesn't want to help here, and has nothing to say to me on the subject of biological death. What I imagine happens is that for the self time begins to flow backwards; even before death, the act of dying is the act of reliving an entire life, and at the end of the dying process, consciousness divides into the consciousness of ones parents and ones children, and then it moves through these modalities, and then divides again. It's moving forward into the future through the people who come after you, and backwards into the past through your ancestors. The further away from the moment of death it is, the faster it moves, so that after a period of time, the Tibetans say 42 days, one is reconnected to everything that ever lived, and the previous ego-pointed existence is defocused. One is returned to the ocean, the morphogenetic field, or the One of Plotinus—you choose your term. A person is a focused illusion of being, and death occurs when the illusion of being can be sustained no longer. Then everything flows out and away from this disequilibrium state that life is. It is a state of disequilibrium, and it is maintained for decades, but finally, like all disequilibrium states, it must yield to the Second Law of Thermodynamics. At that point it runs down, and its specific character disappears into the general character of the world around it. It has returned then to the void/plenum.

During a workshop at Esalen in 1994, Terence McKenna told a small crowd, "When you have a drug which conveys you into an inhabited space, even the simplest explanation is going to be pretty baroque," referring to the as yet unexplained phenomenon of entity encounter reported during DMT trips. Fascinating debate still continues in the psychedelic community as to what these entities might be; hyperdimensional aliens? Archetypal forms rising from deep in the subconscious? Teachers coded into our DNA?

Whatever position you take, there are few questions as interesting in modern psychology as the ontological status of these entities. While the contact experience can vary significantly, certain themes are reported again and again. These

include entities performing experiments on the individual, finding oneself in a 'nursery' environment and a general 'realer than real' sensation surrounding the whole process. To people who study the reports of UFO abductees this may sound very familiar. Indeed, Rick Strassman, Graham Hancock and others have convincingly elucidated a strong phenomenological link between these seemingly distinct experiences.

It is understandable that, given these crossovers, many people see DMT entities as extraterrestrial intelligences. McKenna himself sometimes seemed to lean toward this conclusion, so it might then come as a surprise to hear him muse later in the same talk: "I think in service of parsimony... these [entities] must be human souls." This statement raises some beautiful and eerie prospects. If we are encountering the souls of the dead, then what happens to us when we die must be as mind-bendingly inexplicable and sublime as DMT entities themselves.

Many shamanic traditions see these beings in very similar terms. Iboga is used to contact ancestors, Ayahuasca is known as "The Vine of the Dead" and in Irish pagan cosmology, the world of the spirits is around us at all times, but only visible in certain circumstances. Some of the spirits are benevolent teachers, others machinelike and heartless. Interestingly, which one you encounter seems to depend to a degree on your own unique psychological and spiritual set, suggesting that whatever you are perceiving in a DMT trip is a synergy between your consciousness and something else. If you are indeed entering the spirit world on these voyages, then the fact that it changes as a result of your presence raises big questions as to the role of consciousness after death.

Whatever these beings are, they have something to teach. The most profound and frequent message gleaned from that otherworldly space seems to be the primacy of love and creativity above all else. If its inhabitants are human souls who have moved on, then perhaps that awareness is the gift we are left with when our bodies dissolve. •



Alexander Beiner
alexander.beiner@gmail.com

What I imagine happens is that for the self time begins to flow backwards;
even before death, the act of dying is the act of reliving an entire life...