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A Road Map to Dying and the Life Beyond: What Four Mystical Traditions Teach Us

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Abstract
Most of us will never fully read the Zohar, the Tibetan Book of the Dead, or the writings of Ibn Arabi. Yet along with Emanuel Swedenborg's accounts of the spiritual world, they describe what happens when we die, and they agree on more than one might expect. This short review lays out a road map drawn from all four mystical sources. In each, death is a passing, not an end. We are not alone, because angels or other beings help each dying human being. The soul leaves the body slowly, over about three days. The entire life is reviewed, then there is a period of waiting before the person awakens into new life in a body suited to the spiritual review and purification. What the soul finds on the other side depends on its own inner state. The traditions part ways mainly on reincarnation. Some of the understandings may have been shared across ancient cultural routes, but others (especially between Swedenborg and Tibetan teachings) appear to have arisen with no contact at all. The review's aim is to serve as a comprehensible guide for readers so that they can research the dying process and what lies Beyond further, according to their own beliefs. It is not intended as a final scholastic word on any of the four traditions.

Keywords: Dying, Afterlife, Swedenborg, Kabbalah, Tibetan Buddhism, Sufism

1. Introduction

People have always wondered, or even dreaded, what happens to them when dying and thereafter. The great religions respond in different ways, and most of what has been written about them is long, scholarly and difficult to read even in simplified translations [1, 2]. This short review does something more quantifiable. It gathers what four mystical traditions teach about the road from dying into the life beyond, and clearly shows where they overlap or disagree.

The four are Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772), the Swedish scientist who reported years of journeys to the spiritual world and back [3]; the Zohar, the central book of Jewish mysticism, which came to light in thirteenth-century Spain [4]; the Tibetan Book of the Dead, a Buddhist guide for the dying and the dead [5]; and Ibn Arabi (1165-1240), the Sufi mystic and teacher of Islam [6]. Four different faith families are represented.

The traditions do not use the same words. Some speak of resurrection, others of rebirth. In this paper "awakening" has been used to describe the general idea, and each tradition's own word is used when possible. The author is not trying to prove that any of these accounts is true. Rather she describes what each tradition teaches we should expect, and where they converge or differ. Well known mantras or prayers are summarized below.

Jewish tradition: The Shema, "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one" (Deuteronomy 6:4), traditionally said as the last words. The deathbed custom comes from wider Jewish practice, not from the Zohar itself.

Islam: The Shahada, "There is no god but God," taught to the dying so it can be their last words. Sufis such as Ibn Arabi consider it central.

Tibetan Buddhism: The mantra Om Mani Padme Hum, often recited near the dying, along with the instruction to recognize the clear light.

Note: The beginning of embodied consciousness is addressed in a recent paper: *A Short Case Study about where Human Consciousness Originates and Whether Love Sustains it* [7]. And because Swedenborg is adamant that Near Death Experiences (NDEs) and actual dying are completely different, readers may explore another recent paper about NDEs: *What if Death Does Not Exist?* [8]: according to Swedenborg, NDEs are a temporary revelatory experience from which people return, while death is a permanent end to the body, but an eternal continuation of one's individual mind-consciousness, since birth.

2. Methods

This is a short narrative review. The four traditions were selected because they come from four different yet well known faith families (Christian, Jewish, Buddhist and Islamic). Each has mystical writings about death and the dying process. The author begins with Swedenborg as the baseline and compares the other three with him. For each tradition standard translations of the major texts and a small number of scholarly studies are review sources. If common features appear in at least two of them, it is noted how they overlap or differ. The summaries rely on English translations. Dates and details are kept broad on purpose. This is a guide for general readers, not a specialist study.

2.1 The four sources

These vary in language, style and content so it helps to know what each one is about, briefly:

Swedenborg's main book on the subject is Heaven and Hell, published in 1758 [3]. It is not a poem, a sermon or channeling. Rather it is a first-person report from a man who described journeys between this world and the next, starting circa 1740. He wrote about what he experienced for nearly three decades. Swedenborg describes actual death, the world of spirits, heaven and hell in dense, orderly, almost scientific detail.

The Zohar is the central book of Kabbalah, the mystical side of Judaism [4, 9]. It is not one story but a large collection of teachings in Aramaic, written as a commentary on the Torah and set in the days of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, a second-century teacher. Many modern scholars think it was written in thirteenth-century Spain, most likely by Moses de León. Its teachings on death are scattered throughout the book, which is why scholars such as Isaiah Tishby have gathered them into anthologies [4].

The Tibetan Book of the Dead is called the Bardo Thodol in Tibetan, which means roughly "liberation through hearing in the between" [5, 10]. It is a guide read aloud to a person who is dying or has just died, so they can recognize what is happening and are not frightened. Tradition says the teacher Padmasambhava hid it in the eighth century and Karma Lingpa found it again in the fourteenth. A "bardo" is an in-between state, and the book describes three: the moment of death; the visions that follow; and the pull toward a new life.

Ibn Arabi left no single book about death. His teaching is spread through huge works such as the Meccan Revelations and the Bezels of Wisdom [6]. He builds on the Qur'an, which itself uses the word barzakh for the barrier between death and resurrection, and on Islamic belief about the grave and the judgment. He adds his own perspective of the barzakh as a world of imagination where the soul meets its own deeds.

Together they represent a witness, a commentary, a manual and a mystic's encyclopedia. Because four such different sources agree by as much as they do, it makes each one worthy of review.

3. Results

3.1 The dying moment and who helps us transition

None of the four traditions describes people dying "alone." Swedenborg writes that angels from heaven attend the dying and help them as they pass into the spiritual world [3]. In the Zohar, a dying person is given an added spirit that lets them glimpse the Divine Presence, and the Angel of Death also appears, a figure the Zohar takes from older Jewish teaching [4, 9]. In the Tibetan teachings, the moment of death brings a "clear light," and a teacher reads guidance aloud so the dying or recently dead can recognize it [5, 10]. Islamic belief, which Ibn Arabi works within, has the angel of death arrive with angels of mercy or of punishment [6].

Converge: In all four, the dying are helped and never alone. The moment of death is a moment of recognition. **Differ:** Swedenborg's helpers are gentle angels, and he has no Angel of Death. The Zohar and Islamic belief include the latter figure. In the Tibetan teachings the helpers are teachers and deities, and much depends on the person recognizing the clear light.

3.2 Leaving the body over approximately three days

Swedenborg describes the spirit staying with the body for a short time and then awaking in the spiritual world, usually put at about the third day [3]. A Jewish teaching older than the Zohar says the soul hovers over the body for three days, hoping to return, and leaves on the fourth when the face changes [11]. The Zohar builds on this picture [4]. In Tibetan practice the body is traditionally left undisturbed for about three days so that consciousness can leave, and the Book of the Dead describes roughly three and a half to four days before the person comes to awakening [5, 10]. The same three-day pattern appears in Zoroastrian teaching (see 3.7). One basic explanation is that a body shows visible change after about three days. Another is that a specific process is taking place as the spirit departs. This review leaves the question open.

Converge: In the Swedenborgian, Jewish, Tibetan and Zoroastrian teachings the departure takes days and not an instant. **Differ:** Swedenborg points to about the third day, the Jewish teaching to three days with the fourth as the turning point, and the Tibetan teaching to three and a half to four days. The Islamic material is less clear on a three-day count. The specific stages *after* death no longer run on earthly time, however forty-nine days is given in Tibetan teachings and up to a year in the Zohar.

3.3 Looking back over a life time, completely and rapidly

In Swedenborg, the person's entire life comes back from the inner spirit's memory, so it is the person who judges themselves, not God who condemns them [3]. In the Zohar, angels record merits and sins, and the soul acknowledges its own record [4, 9]. The Tibetan teachings have the Lord of Death hold up a mirror of the person's deeds [5]. In Ibn Arabi's world, deeds take visible form in the realm between death and the final judgment [6, 12].

Converge: In all four, the entire life undergoes review. **Differ:** They differ on who does the judging. In Swedenborg it is the person alone. In the Zohar angels record and the soul agrees. In the Tibetan teachings the Lord of Death holds the mirror. In Islamic belief angels record the deeds and God judges at the end.

Note: Greyson, a skeptical psychiatrist who studied Near Death Experiences, without a religious agenda, reports that people often re-live their lives from the point of view of those they affected [13]. This supports the Golden Rule: *treat others as you want to be treated.*

3.4 The in-between place and purification or cleansing

All four describe a stage between dying and settling into a final home. Swedenborg calls it the world of spirits, where a person's real character gradually comes to light [3]. The

Zohar describes cleansing, pictured as fire, over as long as a year [4, 9]. The Tibetan Book of the Dead describes up to forty-nine days of visions, peaceful and fearful, that it says are projections of one's own mind [5, 10]. Ibn Arabi describes the barzakh, a realm where inner meanings take shape [6, 12]. In every case the waiting period is more about becoming clear, not about being punished.

Converge: All four have a time in between death and awakening when the person's inner state becomes clear. **Differ:** Swedenborg describes a gradual exposure of character, the Zohar a cleansing by fire, the Tibetan teachings visions that come from one's own mind, and Ibn Arabi a world of imagination. The length also varies, from days to forty-nine days to a year.

3.5 A new spiritual body, but where does the soul go?

The person does not become a ghost. Swedenborg is the most specific. He says people awake in a spiritual body in full human form, with the senses and organs they knew, now suited to a spiritual life, and many at first do not realize they have died [3]. Each then settles among people who share their deepest loves. The Zohar speaks of a garment of light worn by the soul in the Garden of Eden [4, 9]. The Tibetan teachings describe a mental body with all its senses, but no solid matter [5]. Ibn Arabi describes an imaginal body in an imaginal world [6, 12]. Paul's phrase "spiritual body" in the New Testament (1 Corinthians 15) seems to concur.

Converge: In all four, the person goes on as themselves, with their senses, in a subtle body, and where they end up (such as Heaven or Hell) reflects their inner state. **Differ:** Swedenborg is the most detailed, with a full human form and organs. The Zohar speaks of a garment of light, the Tibetan teachings of a mental body with no solid matter that is headed toward rebirth, and Ibn Arabi of an imaginal body.

Note: *The notion that a soul can exist and think and be wise without a body is an error that stems from deceptive appearances. Every soul is in a spiritual body after it casts off the material skin it carried around in this world.* Swedenborg, Divine Love and Wisdom 14 [14].

3.6 Where the traditions differ or converge the most

The main split is reincarnation. The Zohar teaches a return to earth (gilgul) for souls with unfinished work, and Tibetan Buddhism teaches rebirth as the normal path [4, 5]. Swedenborg firmly rejects it [3], and mainstream Islamic teaching does not include it [6]. They also differ in timing, from days to a year, and on whether judgment comes from God or from the soul's own state. Swedenborg and the Tibetan teachings lean toward the latter. Swedenborg describes ongoing learning and growth, but this happens in spiritual or angelic realms, not through a bodily reincarnation.

The mystical four agree that: Death is a passage; help is present; the entire life comes up for review; there is a waiting period before the person continues on as themselves "dressed" in a body best suited to the state of their soul.

3.7 A Persian thread

Some of what these traditions share may have been transmitted, for example on world trade routes or through Empire building. Ancient Persian teaching, as preserved in the Zoroastrian tradition, already pictured the soul lingering near the body for three nights, being judged at dawn on the fourth day, crossing a bridge, and meeting an inner figure that reflected on how the person had lived [15]. When Jewish communities lived under Persian rule, ideas like these seem to have entered Jewish thought, and from there they passed into Christianity and Islam [2]. Egyptian and Greek ideas of weighing life and ascent reached the same streams through Alexandria [2]. So the similarities between Swedenborg, the Zohar and Ibn Arabi may owe something to a shared inheritance. The Tibetan material appears to have grown on a separate branch from India, which makes its agreement with the others harder to explain by sharing or dissemination of ideas.

3.8 Agreement without contact

The Tibetan teachings on death grew from Indian Buddhism, far from the Persian and Mediterranean world, and the Book of the Dead was not known in the West until it was first translated into English in 1927 [16]. Swedenborg could not have read it, yet he is known by Suzuki, as *Buddha of the North* [17]. In both, the dying are met by a light or presence, the entire life comes up for review, and the person passes through an in-between state before arriving anywhere final. Most striking of all, both confirm that what the soul sees, and where it goes, comes from within. Tibetan teachers say the visions are projections of the mind, and Swedenborg says each spirit is drawn to the place that matches its ruling love [3, 5]. Ibn Arabi's imaginal world, where deeds take visible form, seems to concur and the scholar Henry Corbin has already compared it with Swedenborg's world of spirits [12, 18]. Whether this agreement reflects a common human experience of dying, a common spiritual reality, or a shared pattern of the mind, is a question this review leaves open to readers. What it can say is that people in different centuries and cultures, with no known contact, arrived at accounts that have many common features or patterns.

3.9 What hospice nurses and families report

Hospice and palliative care offer a different kind of evidence. The traditions describe what follows death, and no nurse or family member can observe that. The weeks and hours before death can be observed, and nurses, doctors and families have written about them for decades.

The best known recent study is by Christopher Kerr and colleagues, who interviewed 66 hospice patients in Buffalo, New York. About 88 percent reported at least one dream or vision, and nearly all said it felt real [19]. Reports from nurses and care assistants in the United Kingdom, including in a nursing home, describe the same kinds of experiences [20]. A systematic review found that such dreams and visions are reported by patients, bereaved families and staff, and are mostly a source of comfort [21]. A recent review of the research also found that the most common content is the presence of deceased relatives or friends, accompanied by talk of getting ready for a journey [21]. A nationwide Japanese survey of deathbed visions, titled "My deceased mother took me to heaven," reports similar content in a different culture [22]. Earlier, doctors and nurses in the United States and India described dying people seeing apparitions, mostly of dead relatives, who seemed to have come to take them away [23]. The hospice nurses Maggie Callanan and Patricia Kelley likewise wrote of dying people speaking of journeys and of seeing those who had died [24].

How well does this match the road map? Partly. It fits the first stage, since the dying are met by helpers, often people

they knew, and many in hospice speak of leaving on a journey. It also fits the shared picture that the dying are comforted and not abandoned. It does not test the later stages. The three-day departure, the in-between place and the new body all come after death, where bedside observers cannot follow. A full life review also appears to be less common at the bedside than in NDE accounts, and a minority of visions are distressing [19]. Researchers separate these visions from delirium and medication effects, but they do not clarify what the visions mean [19, 21]. Swedenborg treats actual death as different from a temporary NDE (see Section 1), and hospice accounts lie between the two, since the person is dying, but still alive.

Note: While the author's mother was dying (South Africa, 1995) there came a point when the doctor shared this information with her: from his experience of dying patients, her mother had about three days "left." The doctor remarked that he noted the same when he visited his own mother for the last time.

4. Discussion: The actual steps of dying in each mystical tradition

Section 3 followed the road map step-by-step. The next section follows it tradition-by-tradition, so that the complete journey can be seen in one place. The steps are condensed summaries of long texts and serve as a guide, not a quotation. Three sample poems and a prose text represent each tradition's mystical beliefs about death.

4.1 Swedenborg

The psychologist Leon James has summarized Swedenborg's account of dying in seven steps [25]:

1. Death occurs when breathing and the heartbeat both stop. The physical body is then separated from the spiritual body, which carries on.
2. "Resuscitation" is the drawing out of the spirit from the body and its entry into the spiritual world.
3. Swedenborg watched this happen with others and said he went through it himself, so that he would know the process fully [3].
4. When physical breathing stops, the person becomes aware of the inner breathing of the spiritual body. Thinking and perceiving continue without a break.
5. The person senses angels at a distance, then close by, sitting at the head. Their feelings and thoughts are shared with the person, who is not aware of their own worries at that point.
6. For several hours the angels keep the person in the thoughts they had when dying (over a 3 day period). Then the person is awakened and gradually takes over, returning to the familiar loves and thoughts of their life.
7. The eyes open. The person, now in a spiritual body, walks away from the place of resuscitation and begins a new life, meeting others who have already died.

Like Himself [26]

It is to be observed
That a man after death
Is not natural
But a spiritual man.
Nevertheless
He still appears
In all respects
Like Himself,
And so much so
That he knows not
But that he is still
In the natural world
For he has a similar
Body, countenance,
Speech and senses.

4.2 The Zohar

The Zohar scatters its teaching on death through many passages, so the order below follows the scholars' anthologies and the Jewish teaching that builds on it [4, 9, 11]:

1. Shortly before death the person is given an added spirit and can glimpse the Divine Presence. The Angel of Death appears.
2. Angels stand by the dying person and the life is reviewed. The soul acknowledges its own record before leaving.
3. The soul leaves the body and hovers near it for about three days [11].
4. During the first week the soul is said to travel between the home and the grave, mourning the body.
5. A period of cleansing follows, pictured as fire, lasting up to a year.
6. The purified soul rises to the Garden of Eden, clothed in a garment of light, at a level that reflects its life.
7. Some souls return to earth (gilgul) to complete unfinished work. The final hope is a full restoration and union with the Source of Life.

Expanses, Expanses (Merchavim, Merchavim)
by Rav Abraham Isaac Kook (1865-1935) [27]:

Expanses, expanses,
Expanses divine my soul craves.
Confine me not in cages,
Of substance or of spirit.
My soul soars the expanses of the heavens,
Walls of heart and walls of deed
Will not contain it.
Morality, logic, custom –
My soul soars above these,
Above all that bears a name,
Above delight,
Above every delight and beauty,
Above all that is exalted and ethereal.
I am lovesick –I thirst, I thirst for God,
As a deer (hart) for water brooks…(Psalm 42.1)

4.3 The Tibetan Book of the Dead

The Book of the Dead is itself an ordered manual, so its steps are the clearest of the four [5, 10]:

1. As death nears, a teacher or friend reads the guidance aloud, and a practice called phowa may be used to help consciousness leave well.
2. At the moment of death the clear light appears. A person who recognizes it is freed.
3. Most do not, and fall into a swoon for about three and a half to four days, during which the body is left undisturbed.
4. The person wakes into visions, peaceful and then fearful, and is told again and again to see them as projections of their own mind.
5. The life is judged. The Lord of Death holds up a mirror of the person's deeds.
6. In a mental body, the person is drawn toward a new birth,

and the reader advises how to choose well. The whole in-between period lasts up to forty-nine days.
7. Rebirth.

This text guides the awareness through the Chikhai Bardo (the moment of death and the dawning of the "Primary Clear Light"), warning the consciousness not to be blinded or terrified by the projections of its own mind (Dawa-Samdup translation, 1927) [16]:

> *O nobly-born, when thy body and mind were separating, thou must have experienced a glimpse of the Pure Truth, subtle, sparkling, bright, dazzling, glorious, and radiantly awesome…Be not daunted thereby, nor terrified, nor awed. That is the radiance of thine own true nature. Recognize it.*

4.4 Ibn Arabi

Ibn Arabi writes more about what these stages mean than about their exact order, so his steps rest on the Islamic belief that he builds on [6, 12]:

1. At death the angel of death comes, with angels of mercy or of punishment.
2. The dying are encouraged to say the Shahada as their last words.
3. After burial, two angels question the person in the grave, in Islamic tradition.
4. The soul enters the barzakh, the realm between death and resurrection. For Ibn Arabi this is a world of imagination, where the soul has an imaginal body and meets its own deeds in visible form.
5. At the end of time come the resurrection and the final judgment, followed by paradise or the fire.

Rumi's poem Ghazal 911 from the Dīwān-i Shams-i Tabrīzī. Translated from the Persian it reflects the core Sufi concept of physical death as a joyous reunion with the Divine rather than a tragic loss. R. A. Nicholson's 1898 translation [28]:

> *When my bier moveth on the day of death*
> *Think not my heart is in this world.*
> *Do not weep for me and cry "woe, woe!"*
> *Thou wilt fall in the devil's snare: that is woe*
> *When thou seest my hearse, cry not, "gone, gone!"*
> *Union and meeting are mine in that hour*
> *If thou commit me to the grave, say not "Farewell, farewell"*
> *For the grave is a curtain hiding the communion of paradise*
> *After beholding descent, consider resurrection*
> *Why should setting be injurious to the sun and moon?*
> *To thee it seems a setting, but 'tis a rising*
> *Tho' the vault seems a prison, 'tis the release of a soul*
> *What seed went down into the earth but it grew?*
> *Why this doubt of thine as regards the seed of man?*
> *What bucket was lowered but it came out brimful?*
> *Why should the Joseph of the Spirit complain of the well?*
> *Shut thy mouth on this side, and open it beyond*
> *For in placeless air will be thy triumphal song.*

4.5 Four comparisons and the most famous resurrection

These mystical faiths share similar core beliefs: Help accompanies each dying person; the body is left behind; a full life review is seen; the soul passes through a waiting period and then settles into a new body and life. The main differences are whether the in-between phase ends in rebirth on earth (the Tibetan teachings, and for some souls the Zohar) or in a lasting spiritual home (Swedenborg and, after the resurrection, Ibn Arabi), and how long the process takes. It would be impossible at this climactic point not to mention the resurrection of a 1st century Jewish rabbi known as Jesus of Nazareth in his own words: *Thus it is written that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem* (English Standard Version, Luke 24:46-47).

5. Conclusion

Four traditions, from different eras, regions and faiths, provide a surprisingly similar road map. You do not die alone. The soul leaves the body slowly, over about three days. The entire life is reviewed. There is a waiting period during which the person's inner state comes to light. Then they awake into new life, in a body suited to the spiritual review and cleansing. The traditions part ways on reincarnation, on timing, and on who does the judging. Some of the agreements may have been transported across time and place, and some seem to have arisen independently. This review does not settle which is right, or whether any of these accounts is true. It offers a short guide to what four respected traditions, independently and collectively, teach us that we should expect while dying and in the Beyond.

6. Recommendations

First, each section should be checked against the original texts and reviewed by a scholar from that tradition. *Second*, the three-day pattern deserves its own medical study, since it appears in places that seem to have had no direct contact. The pattern is mentioned again in hospice. *Third*, other traditions could be added later, for example the Egyptian and Christian mystical writings, to see whether the same road map holds. *Fourth*, the road map could be compared with modern NDEs or hospice, which often describe similar features.

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