

INTERVIEW WITH DR. CHARLES TART. PSYCHOLOGIST AND PARAPSYCHOLOGIST. ONE OF THE FOUNDERS OF TRANSPERSONAL PSYCHOLOGY AND MOST FAMOUS FOR HIS WORK INTO ALERTED STATES OF CONSCIOUSNESS

Dr Charles Tart is that rare breed of scientist who has dared to investigate the paranormal. A Ph.D. psychologist who has had a long-standing interest in parapsychology, he is perhaps best known for his work on Lucid dreams, out of body experiences, ESP, hypnosis and altered states of consciousness. And he is also one of the world's leading experts in the research into the question of survival of consciousness after death.

In 1969 Tart edited a psychological text titled: *Altered States of Consciousness* and authored several of the articles in the anthology. This was one of the first serious academic studies into the effects of various mind-altering effects of drugs like LSD and other psychoactive compounds. Tart was particularly interested in exploring the possibilities that psychotropic drugs like LSD could be used to transport one into the transcendent realm of higher consciousness or truth. He maintains that drug induced altered states of consciousness are not in fact very good at doing this, although they can have profound effects on one's psychology and behavior.

After retiring from the University of California at Davis psychology Department, Tart joined The Institute for Transpersonal Psychology at Palo Alto, where he currently teaches.

Tart:

I got involved in studying the paranormal when I was a teenager, actually. For me it was an attempt to solve the conflicts I was experiencing between religion and science. Some people get enchanted by science and totally throw out their religion. Other people stay with their religion but they sort of ignore science, as if it didn't exist and both of those are psychologically unhealthy. You can't throw out parts of reality you don't like. I was very lucky, 'because I was a voracious reader at the time and discovered the old British literature on psychical research and the American stuff on parapsychology and realized that people who have gone through this kind of conflict themselves, had said, well, wait a minute, yes, there's a lot of nonsense in religion, but should we just throw it out wholesale and yes, science has made a lot of progress but is it the final word? How about if we apply the methods of science to studying the mind, to studying the spirit, to studying religion and see if we can start weeding out the wheat from the chaff.

Can you tell me about one of the most successful Out of the Body experiments you conducted?

Tart.

I was very lucky in being able to do a laboratory experiment with someone who had out of the body experiences regularly. I've called her Mrs. Z and she was a young woman who was our babysitter. We found out that ever since she was a child, she thought it was normal to go to bed, sleep, dream and occasionally wake up floating near the ceiling, looking down at your body in bed.

Well, she asked me, as a psychologist, what was really happening and I told her, well, there are really just two main theories. The one theory says it is what it seems to be. Your mind is somehow in a different place than where your physical body is and the other is its some kind of hallucination or fancy dream and you're really just imagining it. So, her response was, that's interesting. How can I tell which is which?

Well, after she had performed a number of successful experiments at home I invited her spend four nights in my sleep laboratory, 'because I was very curious as to what happened to her body while she was having this out of the body experience.. She had a number of out of the body experiences. I was measuring her brain waves and her heart rate and the like and I'd done a lot of sleep research. And I found that her out of the body experiences were not in the same brainwave state as dreams. She was asleep, but the pattern was somewhat different from ordinary dreams.

Anyway, after she went to bed, I would put a 5-digit random number on a shelf up near the ceiling, so anyone near the ceiling could read it, but no one lying in bed could read it and tell her, if she went up there, please memorize the number, look at the clock nearby and memorize the time, too, and wake up and tell me. On almost all occasions but one, she said, no she'd floated out of her body but she wasn't high enough to see the number or she'd been on the wrong side of the room or something. But, the one occasion on which she said she saw the number, she correctly identified it as 25193. Now the odds are a hundred thousand to 1 against guessing a five-digit number in one guess like that. So, I was very impressed. It suggested that there was really some extrasensory component to this. That her mind was really up there near the ceiling in some sense. Now, I don't claim that it's the final word on it. I published this and made it very clear that this was a demonstration that you could take something as exotic and important as the soul apparently leaving the body and bring it into a laboratory and start to get good scientific data on it.

Can you define the term veridical Out of Body experience?

When you define an out of the body experience as having these two components, as feeling located somewhere else than where your physical body is and simultaneously feeling that your consciousness is clear, not just dreamy or the like, you're really defining an experience and it says nothing about the ultimate status of that experience, whether it's imaginary or not. You know, it could be a lucid dream, in that sense, but when we talk about a veridical out of the body experience, we mean that a person has brought back correct information about that distant location that they could not have known or gotten through their ordinary senses. So, if they tell you what's happening in a distant room or at the house of people that they couldn't normally know what's happening, then you've got a psychic, a paranormal, an extrasensory component in there and that makes the out of the body experience much more interesting. I mean, as an experience, it's exciting enough, because when people have an out of the body experience, it usually produces a drastic change in their belief system. Typically, a person who's had an out of the body experience, will say something like, 'I no longer believe that I'm going to survive death. I know I'm going to survive death.' It's not belief. I've had the direct experience of being out of my body and functioning independently of it.

Do you think that the veridical out of body experience can be explained by current scientific theories?

When people try to explain out of the body experiences with current, mainstream scientific theories, which are all materialistic theories that say that the only reality is matter. They basically don't explain the experiences at all. They pretend to explain it by ignoring important parts of it and just focusing on some component that you can make sense of. So, if there's a visual distortion, they could talk about a brain malfunction that might produce that. But, I'm not at all impressed with mainstream attempts to explain out of the body experiences. Any good scientific theory has to adequately cover all the data you already have as well as predict new data and when you try to explain something by ignoring parts of the data that don't conveniently fit, that's not science, that's scientism. That's turning a materialistic view of the universe into a rigid kind of philosophy and a prejudicial way of looking at things. There's a lot of it around. That's how we humans are, but it's not good science.

How common are OBEs?

We don't really know, simply because it's kind of taboo to talk about things like that and there haven't been really good, large-scale surveys that have gotten around that problem. You could make some general estimates. It's certainly, say, more than one in a hundred people, probably not as many as one in five. If you ask around among your acquaintances, it would not be surprising to find someone who'd had an out of the body experience.

Are OBEs common to all cultures?

One of the most interesting things about out of the body experiences is that we didn't invent them. It's not as if it only happens in recent, Western culture. You can find accounts of out of the body experiences in all the cultures of the world and because of this universality of it, it's clear to me that this is idea of where a soul came from. You know, it's not that some theologians took words for breath and kind of invented a concept of soul or something like that. People have the experience of being clear in their mind and outside their bodies and the concept of soul came from that. That makes understanding the out of the body experience really important as part of understanding religion.

Do you think that any of the current scientific theories, which try to explain the Near Death Experience, hold up?

Tart.

The materialistic theories of near-death experiences say that it's basically a brain malfunction. There's some kind of hallucination going on producing a dream like experience. That's not what the experience feels like to people, it doesn't feel dreamlike at all, but sometimes you wonder how the brain could have been functioning. Now, a lot of times, of course, you don't know. It's an accident or something. But, we have cases like the Pam Reynolds case where this woman was under incredible amounts of anesthesia, there were measures to show that her brain was not functioning, in both the cortex and the brain stem and yet, she had a veridical out of body experience as part of her near death experience. That is, she correctly described scenes in the operating room that allowed you to sort of time lock when the experience was happening and she went on to have a near death experience when the blood was drained out of her brain. Now, that certainly makes you take the idea of mind functioning independently of brain much more seriously.

So what do you think happens during a veridical NDE?

Tart.

To answer that question, I wish I could project myself a hundred years into the future when I think we'll know a lot more about this. Because, probably, there are several different kinds of near-death experiences that are all mixed together in our mind right now and, so, our knowledge at this stage of the game is quite crude. Okay? So, I have to give you just crude answers. One of them is that for

some people, it's probably just a hallucination. For other people at the opposite extreme, my best guess, is that the mind, which is of a different nature than the body, actually leaves the body and begins to experience an altered state of consciousness and, perhaps, gets a glimpse of what disembodied life, life after death, is like. Now, that's an exciting possibility to me. I'm not saying it's proven, but that's what makes the most sense out of some of the data. I want to know a lot more about that. I don't want to stop at that level of detail. I want to know exactly what happens. I want thousands and thousands of people to be interviewed more closely who have died and I'd like to bring this into the laboratory someday.

You often use the term scientism. What do you mean by this?

Tart.

One of the most powerful religions and philosophies in the world today is Scientism. It's not a word I invented, although people credit it with me sometimes. Sociologists invented it in the early 1900's when they noticed that some people took the current findings of science, at any time, and instead of recognizing that they're simply the best explanation we can do at the time, turn them into dogma. Turn them into a final kind of truth. So, science, which is supposed to be a continually open process, turns into scientism. Well, you combine the method of science with a philosophy of materialism, you get arrogant about what we already know and you get scientism. When the question of post mortem survival is raised, scientism simply says, nonsense, don't bother me with the evidence. That's not good science. That's not good common sense. That's arrogance and we know a lot about arrogance in human life.

What sort of evidence have you found supports the possibility of life after death?

Tart.

When I've tried to evaluate what kind of evidence we have for some sort of post mortem survival, I try to look at a broad spectrum of evidence, 'because I don't think there's one crucial kind of fact here. It's putting a lot of things together. One of the most basic things I look at is psychic phenomenon in general: Telepathy, clairvoyance, precognition and psycho kinesis. There is excellent evidence that they all happen. In fact, I think anybody who does not accept the fact that they happen is basically ignorant or prejudiced. Hundreds and hundreds of excellent experiments are out there. But these are all phenomenon where the mind does something that you can't explain in terms of the brain and body. The mind in telepathy reaches out and gets information from another mind, for instance. These already argue toward a dualist idea. Toward the idea that mind is something different than brain, per se. Well, if it's something different, then when the brain dies, maybe the mind doesn't die. So, that's where I start on the survival

evidence, because that's very good quality evidence. Then you look at stuff like out of the body experiences and near-death experiences, which point in the direction of survival and certainly have enormous psychological influence on the people who ignore them and, finally, you get up into the most direct evidence of all, that being Mediumship research.

Do you think the evidence from mediums is convincing?

Tart.

The most direct evidence we have for some kind of post mortem survival is studies with mediums, where we have deliberately attempted to contact a surviving spirit and say, prove you are who you claim to be. That evidence as a whole is very rich, very confusing, very contradictory, but makes, in my mind, an excellent case of maybe we survive death. I don't think it's proven it, but it has certainly shown you can't ignore the idea that we survive death. The reason I say that is occasionally you get an apparent surviving spirit who gives good specific evidence of knowing things that only the living person would know. You also get a lot of apparent surviving spirits that talk in glib generalities. They aren't evidential of anything in particular except maybe how people like to talk. You also get, of course, fraudulent Mediumship where mediums use private detectives to find out about people.

But you know in any area of human enterprise there are people who do it fraudulently in order to influence other people, make money and the like. Sometimes, you can go to a medium and ask for Uncle Joe and get quite specific evidence that this is probably Uncle Joe. Now, you can complicate things if you know the whole range of phenomena here, depending on what you hold as probable and improbable. So, for instance, if you think it's impossible that anybody could survive and that the mind is all materialistic, you throw out all the evidence from parapsychology generally and from Mediumship without even really looking at it. But, that's simple prejudice. Some people will accept paranormal abilities like telepathy and say, 'well, we know that human beings sometimes use telepathy, but survival after death is ridiculous.' So that if Uncle Joe gives us specific information, the medium is just unconsciously reading the mind of the person who's inquiring about Uncle Joe. Now that is probably true in some cases, because we do have experimental evidence that people can use telepathic abilities without even knowing that they're using it. So, you know, the idea that people unconsciously use funny abilities to support their own belief systems, who's going to argue against that. People do it all the time. So, it's when a medium produces evidence from a surviving spirit that's not easily picked up from the inquirer's mind or something like that that the evidence gets even more impressive and we have cases like that.

Do you think it's a shame that so little money is spent on researching these fields?

Tart

It's my firm conviction as a person, as well as a scientist, that the question of whether we survive death is a vitally important question. A lot more important than curing the common cold and we should be devoting lots of time and effort and money to doing that. I did a survey, years ago, of parapsychologists, most of whom look at the easier questions like telepathy, instead of the tough ones like survival and there was a million or two million dollars a year spent on the entire field. We're basically not applying science to this most vital of questions. That's nuts. If you'll excuse a technical, scientific term, that's as nuts as can be.

Do you think that the evidence for post mortem survival should bring about a major paradigm change?

Tart

The idea that survival of bodily death is impossible and that we're nothing but our brains and bodies is really a function of an outmoded view in science, a Newtonian World View. Now, the Newtonian worldview works very well for everyday events, but one of the most interesting things about modern science, especially when you look at stuff like quantum theory, is that the world is far more mysterious than we think we are. I mean, we now have experimental evidence of what Einstein called spooky action at a distance. That we can instantaneously affect something in a distant part of the universe. That's really wild. If consciousness has any of the qualities of this quantum level of existence, then phenomenon like telepathy or survival of bodily death is probably not so mysterious after all. I'm not going to say quantum approaches prove that we might be immortal or something like that. They certainly require us to open up our minds. But, if we're going to study the nature of mind, I have to advocate that we become very old-fashioned psychologists this way. Psychology was originally defined as the study of the mind and when that turned out to be difficult, then we went back to behavior and neurochemistry and the like, but we need to study the mind on it's own terms, not simply wait for advances in the physical sciences to somehow explain things. Maybe they will, maybe they won't, but don't wait for it. Get in there, study your mind for what it is now. It's a real interesting place.

If you believe in an afterlife, do you think the sort of life you lead when alive might affect your experience there?

Tart

As both a person and as a scientist, I might say I believe in an afterlife, except I don't like to use the word believe, okay? I don't know anything for certain, but my best bet is that there's some sort of existence after death and I would presume that existence is strongly conditioned by who you are on earth. Okay? A model I have for that, for instance, is the kind of altered state of consciousness that can develop, say, through psychedelic drugs or extreme conditions where the kind of experience is a reflection of who you are. If you are a person with a lot of conflicts, they'll be writ large. If you're a person who's basically in good touch with yourself and the universe, it'll be a happy sort of experience. So, I'm betting that after I die, I'll go on. I express it this way, sometimes, given all the evidence I've read about survival, when I die, I won't be surprised if I regain consciousness sometime after death. But, I'll also be rather surprised if I regain consciousness. Because what I normally think of as I has a lot to do with this physical body. Without that physical body as a mold, as a pattern, I think my consciousness is going to expand much more in a mystical kind of direction. I'm looking forward to it. Now, that's a crazy statement, you know, and the biological part of me, of course, fears death and hopes it won't be painful and what not. But an ideal death for me would be one where the pain was controlled and I could keep enough clarity to really observe the process and I'd kind of like to go into it and come back and dictate a report to a faithful assistant and go back and explore again, go back and forth, I mean. As a scientist, I'm looking forward to the process.