

# Between Two Shores

*Metta Jhana, Near-Death Experience, and the Chaplain's Ministry to the Dying and Bereaved*

A Professional Training Guide for Chaplains and Spiritual Care Providers

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## **Preface: The Threshold Ministry**

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The chaplain stands at a threshold that most people in our culture cannot bear to approach too closely — the place where the living and the dying meet, where grief carves new topographies in the human heart, and where the questions that polite society avoids become the only questions that matter. To serve well in this ministry requires more than compassionate presence, though that is irreplaceable. It also requires frameworks — grounded, serious, spiritually coherent frameworks — that can accompany those in your care into the deepest waters of human experience.

This training guide brings together two bodies of knowledge that are rarely placed in direct conversation: the ancient contemplative science of metta jhana meditation, and the rapidly growing empirical literature on near-death experiences (NDEs). Together, they offer the chaplain a uniquely powerful set of tools: a practice for cultivating the quality of presence required for this work, and a conceptual map that can genuinely reorient the grieving and the dying toward experiences of consciousness that transcend physical death.

This is not a guide for imposing beliefs on those in your care. It is a guide for expanding the vocabulary of possibility — for offering, with intellectual honesty and pastoral sensitivity, a body of evidence and practice that may transform terror into wonder and grief into a deeper communion.



## **I. The Science of Jhana: Preparing the Chaplain's Inner Instrument**

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Before the chaplain can serve those who are dying or grieving, they must tend to the quality of their own consciousness. The jhana meditation system — a structured, progressive deepening of meditative absorption described in the Pali Buddhist canon and paralleled across contemplative traditions worldwide — provides exactly this inner preparation.

The word jhana (Sanskrit: dhyana) refers to states of refined mental absorption in which the ordinary noise of discursive thought has subsided and awareness becomes luminous, unified, and stable. The tradition describes four primary jhanas, each characterized by the progressive quieting of mental activity. The first jhana is entered when the five hindrances — sensual craving, ill-will, sloth, restlessness, and doubt — are temporarily suspended. What remains is a quality of directed attention accompanied by what the Pali texts call piti (rapture) and sukha (a deep, quiet pleasure). As jhana deepens into the second and third stages, even the subtle movements of directed thought settle, and equanimity emerges. In the fourth jhana, the mind rests in a state of perfect stillness and luminous clarity — purified, workable, and radically open.

For the chaplain, the relevance is immediate and practical. Contemporary neuroscience has confirmed that deep meditative states significantly reduce activity in the default mode network — the brain region associated with self-referential rumination, anxiety, and the constant narrative of the ego. When a chaplain enters a room from a place of jhana-cultivated stillness, they bring something palpable: a quality of presence that those who are dying and those who are grieving can physically feel. They are not projecting their own fear, not filling silence with compulsive words, not unconsciously defending against the reality of death. They are genuinely present — and that presence is itself the primary intervention.

## **The Metta Foundation**

Metta bhavana — loving-kindness meditation — is both a precursor to jhana and a jhana in its own right. The practitioner begins by cultivating a genuine felt sense of goodwill toward oneself, then extends it outward in widening circles: to loved ones, to neutral persons, to those with whom there is difficulty, and finally to all sentient beings without exception. The traditional phrases — 'May you be happy. May you be safe. May you be free from suffering. May you live with ease' — function as tuning mechanisms, gradually aligning the practitioner's entire field of awareness with unconditional benevolence.

When metta is developed to the level of absorption, it becomes a state of being rather than a technique — a sustained radiation of warmth that dissolves the boundary between the one who

cares and the one who is cared for. For the chaplain working with the dying or bereaved, this is not sentimentality. It is a rigorous inner discipline that makes genuine compassionate presence possible over extended periods, without burnout, without projection, and without the subtle distancing that characterizes much professional care.



## **II. Near-Death Experiences: The Evidence of a Consciousness Beyond the Brain**

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Among the most significant developments in consciousness research over the past five decades is the careful, methodologically rigorous documentation of near-death experiences — the vivid, structured, and often transformative experiences reported by individuals who have been clinically dead and subsequently resuscitated. The NDE literature has moved from anecdote to serious scientific investigation, with landmark contributions from cardiologist Pim van Lommel, psychiatrist Bruce Greyson, physician Raymond Moody, and neuroscientist Eben Alexander, among many others.

The consistency of NDE phenomenology across cultures, ages, religious backgrounds, and levels of prior belief is striking. Core features recur with remarkable reliability and include: a sense of leaving the physical body and observing it from above; movement through a dark tunnel toward an intensely loving light; encounters with deceased relatives and friends; a life review experienced not merely as memory but as simultaneous perception from the perspectives of all whom one has affected; encounters with beings of light or vast intelligence; a border or boundary that cannot be crossed; and a return to the body, often experienced as deeply unwanted, accompanied by a transformation in values, the elimination of the fear of death, and frequently the emergence of new psi capacities.

### **What NDEs Tell Us About Consciousness**

The most scientifically significant aspect of NDEs is not their subjective richness but the conditions under which they occur. In van Lommel's landmark prospective study published in *The Lancet* in 2001, patients reported complex, lucid, and emotionally profound experiences during periods of cardiac arrest, when the brain was, by all electroencephalographic measures, flatlined. The same pattern appears in Greyson's decades of documented cases: the richer and more detailed the experience, the less brain activity was occurring at the time.

This inverts the materialist assumption that richer experience requires more brain activity. It points instead toward a model in which consciousness is not generated by the brain but is instead received or filtered by it — a distinction with enormous implications. Philosophers of mind such as William James, Henri Bergson, and more recently Bernardo Kastrup have articulated what is now called the 'transmission theory' or 'filter hypothesis' of consciousness: the brain as a reducing valve that constrains an otherwise boundless field of awareness to the narrow band necessary for biological survival. When the filter is removed — through death, near-death, deep meditation, or certain states of consciousness — awareness expands rather than contracts.

For the chaplain, this is not merely interesting philosophy. It is directly usable pastoral content. To be able to say to a dying person, with genuine intellectual confidence: 'The research actually suggests that as your brain quiets, you may find that your awareness expands rather than diminishes' — that is a transformative offering. It meets the fear of annihilation with evidence, not just reassurance.



### **III. The Convergence: Jhana, NDEs, and the Field of Consciousness**

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What emerges when we place jhana practice alongside the NDE literature is not merely a set of useful analogies — it is a convergent map. Advanced jhana practitioners and NDE experiencers describe remarkably similar territories. Both report states in which the sense of a separate self dissolves, leaving pure awareness. Both describe encounters with a vast, loving intelligence that seems to underlie all existence. Both report the perception of interconnectedness between all beings. Both frequently emerge with altered relationships to time, death, and the physical world, and with enhanced sensitivity to the inner states of others.

This convergence supports the framework that is increasingly called 'quantum consciousness' or 'nonlocal consciousness' — the understanding, supported by researchers from Roger Penrose to Dean Radin to the teams at the Princeton Engineering Anomalies Research laboratory, that consciousness is not confined to the individual brain but participates in a broader field. In this framework, the boundary between the living and the dead is not absolute; it is a difference of degree of access to the shared field, rather than an ontological wall.

For those who are grieving, this framework has profound pastoral implications. The question 'Will I ever be able to reach my loved one again?' receives a different quality of response when the

chaplain can speak from both contemplative tradition and empirical research. The answer is not a theological claim but an evidential one: the field in which consciousness participates appears to be continuous, and under certain conditions — particularly the conditions cultivated by meditation — human beings appear able to perceive across what we ordinarily regard as the boundary of death.



## **IV. Developing Psi Capacities: Telepathy, Contact, and the Bereaved**

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The NDE literature documents consistently that experiencers return with enhanced psi abilities. Greyson's research finds that NDErs report significantly elevated rates of telepathic perception, precognition, and what many describe as the ability to sense or communicate with deceased individuals. These reports are not relegated to the fringe; they are a consistent, documented feature of the post-NDE experience.

What this suggests — and what metta jhana practice supports — is that these capacities are not supernatural anomalies confined to those who have clinically died. They are human capacities that are ordinarily suppressed by the noise and assumptions of ordinary waking consciousness. When that noise is systematically quieted, through meditation, grief, or the trauma of near-death, these capacities can emerge.

For the bereaved person in the chaplain's care, this has deeply practical implications. Many people who have lost a loved one spontaneously report experiences of contact: sensing the presence of the deceased, hearing their voice, receiving what feels like communication in dreams, or encountering meaningful coincidences that feel unmistakably intentional. These experiences are routinely pathologized or dismissed by medical and even religious professionals. The chaplain who understands the NDE literature can receive these reports with genuine openness and can affirm that they are consistent with a large body of documented human experience.

Furthermore, the chaplain can gently introduce the concept of cultivating this receptivity — not as a spiritual technique that replaces grief, but as a complement to it. Simple metta-based meditation, offered to bereaved persons as a practice of sending loving-kindness to the deceased, can become a genuine channel of felt connection. Many bereaved meditators report that the practice shifts from a one-directional sending to something that feels, experientially, like

a two-directional exchange. Whether interpreted theologically, psychologically, or through the lens of nonlocal consciousness, this experience of felt contact has documented therapeutic effects on grief, reducing complicated grief responses and replacing the horror of annihilation with a sense of continuing relationship.



## V. Practical Training: Protocols for Chaplains

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### Core Meditation Practice for the Chaplain

The following practice is designed to be developed over time. It is not a technique to deploy immediately with those in your care, but a discipline to cultivate in your own life so that the quality it generates becomes your baseline presence.

#### **The Metta Jhana Foundation Practice (Daily, 30–45 minutes)**

1. Begin with 10 minutes of breath-following. Allow the breath to anchor attention without forcing stillness. Notice when hindrances arise — anxiety, drowsiness, distraction — and gently return without judgment.
2. When attention has settled, introduce the metta phrases: 'May I be happy. May I be safe. May I be free from suffering. May I live with ease.' Feel the quality of warmth, not merely repeat words. This may take weeks of regular practice before genuine felt warmth arises.
3. Slowly extend the metta outward: to a loved one, to a neutral person, to someone difficult, to all beings. When you reach 'all beings,' include explicitly those who have died and those who are dying. Include those in your care.
4. As the metta deepens, allow attention to rest in the quality of loving openness itself rather than the phrases. This is the threshold of jhana. Notice if boundaries between 'you sending' and 'field receiving' begin to soften.
5. Rest in this quality for as long as it is stable, then gently return and journal whatever arose — images, felt senses, wordless knowings.

### Pastoral Protocols for the Dying

When working with a person who is facing death, the following principles integrate the frameworks of this guide into practical care:

- Assess the person's existing relationship to consciousness, the afterlife, and spiritual experience without imposing a framework. Many dying people have had experiences — moments of contact with deceased relatives, unusual dreams, or what they describe as 'visits' — that they are afraid to mention for fear of being dismissed.
- When appropriate, share the NDE research not as belief but as data. 'There's a large body of research from people who've had clinical death experiences that might be interesting to consider...' This invites rather than imposes.
- Offer simple metta practice as a form of self-care and connection. 'Would you like to try something simple — just sitting and sending love to the people you care about? Some people find it brings a sense of connection that feels very real.'
- Receive and normalize any experiences of contact or presence the person reports. These are consistent with the broader literature and represent the consciousness field operating naturally as the 'filter' of ordinary waking awareness begins to thin.

## Pastoral Protocols for the Bereaved

For those grieving the loss of a loved one, the integration of these frameworks offers specific supportive possibilities:

- Validate spontaneous contact experiences. Many grieving people report sensing their loved one's presence and desperately need a trusted figure to affirm rather than pathologize this.
- Introduce the concept of consciousness as a field rather than a product of the brain, drawing on the NDE literature. This reframes the question from 'Where did they go?' to 'How might I remain in connection?'
- Offer a simple directed metta practice as a form of continued relationship: sitting quietly, breathing, and sending loving-kindness to the deceased — with genuine openness to receive whatever might come in return. Record what arises without evaluating it immediately.
- Over time, and with those who are interested, introduce more structured contemplative practices that develop the receptivity identified by psi researchers: relaxed, non-grasping attention; the suspension of disbelief without the replacement of belief; and the cultivation of an inner quality of warmth and openness that, according to both NDE experiencers and consciousness researchers, appears to facilitate genuine cross-boundary perception.



## **Conclusion: The Chaplain as Living Bridge**

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The thesis of this guide is simple: the chaplain who cultivates metta jhana as a personal practice and who is grounded in the evidence of the NDE literature becomes something more than a compassionate visitor. They become a living demonstration of the possibility they are offering — that consciousness is vast, that love survives the boundaries we think it cannot cross, and that the terrifying silence of death is, by the evidence of those who have passed through it and returned, not silence at all.

This is not a ministry of certainty. The chaplain does not claim to know what lies beyond death, and the research does not make such claims. What the research does suggest — with extraordinary consistency and across enormous methodological diversity — is that consciousness is not what materialist culture has told us it is. It is not confined to the skull. It does not appear to end when the brain does. And it appears to be accessible, with practice, across the distances we call space, time, and death.

To stand at the bedside of a dying person, or to sit with someone in the first wilderness of grief, carrying both this evidence and the inner quality of consciousness cultivated by metta jhana — this is the chaplain's unique offering. Not answers. Not comfort that papers over the abyss. But a genuine, grounded, luminous presence that says, by its very quality: there is more here than meets the eye. And love goes further than you know.



*"The mind that has been purified and made bright, free from blemish, free from defilements, pliant, workable, steady, attained to imperturbability — such a mind is capable of realizing whatever can be realized by direct knowledge."*

— *Samaññaphala Sutta, Digha Nikaya*

*"I was looking down on my body... I felt completely at peace, completely whole. I understood that I was not my body. I had never been my body. And whoever I was, I was not afraid."*

— *NDE account documented by Dr. Bruce Greyson, University of Virginia Division of Perceptual Studies*

## **Recommended Resources for Further Study**

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The following authors and institutions represent the most rigorous current work in the areas covered by this guide:

- Pim van Lommel — *Consciousness Beyond Life* (2010): The landmark prospective NDE study published in *The Lancet*.
- Bruce Greyson — *After* (2021): A comprehensive survey of NDE research by the University of Virginia's leading researcher.
- Raymond Moody — *Life After Life* (1975, updated 2015): The foundational text of modern NDE research.
- Dean Radin — *The Conscious Universe* (1997) and *Real Magic* (2018): Rigorous meta-analyses of psi research.
- Bhikkhu Bodhi — *In the Buddha's Words*: Authoritative translations of the Pali suttas on jhana and metta.
- University of Virginia Division of Perceptual Studies (DOPS): The premier academic research center for consciousness survival studies.
- The Monroe Institute: Research and training in expanded states of consciousness and nonlocal awareness.
- Insight Timer and the works of Tara Brach and Sharon Salzberg: Accessible metta practice guidance for personal development and sharing with those in care.

*This training guide is intended for use in chaplaincy education and continuing professional development. It does not constitute medical or clinical advice. Chaplains should work within their credentialing bodies' ethical guidelines when integrating contemplative and consciousness-based frameworks into pastoral care.*