

# Michael Nahm

Michael Nahm is a German biologist and parapsychologist whose psi research has focused on terminal lucidity, near-death experiences, cases of the reincarnation type, physical mediumship, hauntings, the history of parapsychology, and various other riddles of the mind and the evolution of life.

## Life and Career

Michael Nahm credits a broad-minded high-school biology teacher for encouraging his interest in philosophy and biological questions such as the origin of life and genetic mutation. In the 1990s he discovered the works of [Rupert Sheldrake](#) and, enthralled by Sheldrake's pushing of the limits of established science, began attempting experiments himself on [dogs mysteriously knowing when their owners would return](#), waking a person from sleep telepathically and other topics. Nahm credits Sheldrake for fostering in him the 'confidence that one can contribute to researching so-called anomalies also privately without belonging to the in-group of responsible experts, and without affiliation to a relevant academic institution'.<sup>[1]</sup>

Nahm finished his studies in biology with examinations in zoology, botany, genetics and palaeontology, and a diploma thesis on the roosting behaviour of migratory songbird species. His doctoral dissertation discussed the physiological responses of beech trees to drought stress. He went on to conduct international research projects in forestry science.

Writing a book on unsolved riddles of evolution<sup>[2]</sup> triggered a permanent strong interest in parapsychology for Nahm, as he realized that paranormal phenomena posed the greatest challenge to the reigning materialistic and neo-Darwinian paradigm of biological processes, including evolution.<sup>[3]</sup> This led him to investigate a wide range of anomalous biological phenomena, his lines of inquiry altering over time, though he has developed a holistic approach to evidence for post-mortem survival as he describes in a 2011 paper.<sup>[4]</sup>

For many years this work was avocational, but in 2018 he accepted an appointment at the Institut für Grenzgebiete der Psychologie und Psychohygiene (IGPP) (Institute for Frontier Areas of Psychology and Mental Health) in Freiburg, Germany, where he is now able to pursue his parapsychological work professionally in an academic institution.

Nahm sees parapsychology not as a rogue child on the margins of science, but actually as the key to gaining a full understanding of biology. While reductionist materialism works for studying classical physics and the simplest biological processes, and what some term 'organicism' is appropriate for more complex living systems, he explains in an interview:

When it comes to studying even more complex living systems, including human beings, the unfolding of consciousness, psi, postmortem survival, or possibly evolution as a whole, I think that ultimately, only a kind of neo-vitalistic and dualistic approach is appropriate. Finally, when we look at the fundamental levels of reality with a metaphysical slant, we might apply a holistic and monistic approach in which the dualistic properties present on lower levels of biological organization are regarded as complementary and as originating in an initially unified source at the heart of being.<sup>[5]</sup>

## Parapsychological Research

### Terminal Lucidity

The term [terminal lucidity](#) was coined by Nahm in a 2009 paper<sup>[6]</sup> and is defined as the sudden (re-)emergence of normal or unusually enhanced mental abilities in dull, unconscious, or mentally disabled patients shortly before death.<sup>[7]</sup> Due to media and public interest in the phenomenon, Nahm is probably best known for this work.

Nahm and co-authors discuss cases of terminal lucidity (which they term ‘paradoxical lucidity’) in which unexpected cognitive functions in patients with severe neurological deficits – dementias, organic brain disease and severe mental illnesses – briefly return around the time of death. In a 2019 paper they review this and related phenomena seeking potential biological mechanisms, and discuss the ethical implications and methodological challenges facing controlled investigations. They conclude that the phenomenon, if confirmed by more rigorously controlled research, challenges standard neurological models, carrying potentially profound implications for treatment of such conditions.<sup>[8]</sup>

## **Near-Death Experiences**

Nahm’s delving into the literature of [near-death experiences](#) (NDEs) has resulted in numerous publications. In the aforementioned 2011 paper, he draws attention to the relationships and similarities between NDEs and unexplained physical changes during NDEs, reciprocally confirmed [out-of-body experiences/crisis apparitions](#), shared NDEs and shared dreams, common content in NDEs, [death-bed visions](#), [reincarnation](#) cases with [intermission memories](#) and after-death communications through [mediums](#), terminal lucidity and some other phenomena related to death, showing how these phenomena all point at a single process.<sup>[9]</sup>

In 2020, Nahm co-authored a paper which used the existing NDE literature as well as an online survey on autoscapy in NDEs – seeing one’s body from a viewpoint outside it, usually above – to test the hypotheses that brain oxygen deprivation makes it impossible for NDEs to be experienced in real time and therefore they must be reconstructed after the brain has at least partially recovered. The findings suggested otherwise, and the co-authors recommended that future discussion and research on NDEs explanations should focus on two possible models: a neurophysiological model allowing for real-time NDEs, or a model which allows that ‘NDEs occur in relative independence from the prevailing neuro-physiological processes in the brain’.<sup>[10]</sup>

Nahm found that NDEs reported in ancient Rome share some features with current Asian cases, such as the subject learning their NDE was being caused by the wrong person having been designated to die, as well as featuring [xenoglossy](#) and an apparently correct [precognitive](#) prediction in one case.<sup>[11]</sup> (See also [Medieval Near-Death Experiences](#).)

## **Normal Cognitive Functioning in Compromised Brains**

Neuroscience posits that human mental functions are generated by brain structures, notably cell layers and tissues in the neocortex. Nahm and co-authors discuss cases in which significant physical deficiencies are found in the brains of individuals who outwardly perform normally or who even display special abilities. These include cases of hydrocephalus – in which accumulating cerebral fluid pushes the brain to the extreme margins close to the skull – and hemispherectomy – in which an entire hemisphere was removed because of conditions such as epilepsy. Nahm and co-authors also consider the abilities of ‘savants’ who display remarkable talents in the presence of compromised brain function. Explanatory models based on extreme brain plasticity and non-reductionist accounts of consciousness are discussed.<sup>[12]</sup>

## **Evolution and Reincarnation**

In an afterword to [James G Matlock's \*Signs of Reincarnation\*](#) (2019) Nahm discusses the importance of childhood reincarnation evidence for understanding evolution. He argues that, since such evidence tends to contradict standard materialism, a more holistic view of evolution needs to be available. Nahm describes an organismically-oriented and vitalist view, where evolutionary processes tap into a fundamental fabric of reality – the same foundations that drive the evidence for past lives.<sup>[13]</sup>

## **Animal Homing Ability**

Despite extensive scientific interest, the homing abilities of animals remain largely mysterious. In a 2015 paper, Nahm discusses the work of two hitherto little-known researchers that include remarkable instances of dogs who repeatedly returned to their owners from unknown locations. One archive details the research of Edwin H Richardson with messenger dogs in World War I. The other concerns more systematic experiments performed by Bernhard Müller between 1953 and 1962 involving 75 dogs. Both authors refute normal sensory explanations for their observations. Nahm finds little consensus among animal experts for bird and mammal homing and argues that some underlying psi component should not be ruled out.<sup>[14]</sup>

## **Physical Mediumship**

Nahm reports on the activities of German physical medium Kai Mügge and the [Felix Experimental Group](#) (FEG), describing his observations during 21 sittings over a period of more than four years. The phenomena typically included unusual movements of a table, raps on the room walls and the ceiling, luminous and psychokinetic phenomena, and the appearance of putative 'ectoplasm' and apports. He concludes that most if not all of these occurrences were fraudulently produced.<sup>[15]</sup>

## **Sudden Hair Whitening**

Nahm discusses the phenomenon of sudden hair whitening occurring within hours or days of emotionally traumatic experiences. Since developed hair has no metabolism, it should be impossible for such changes to occur through normal biological processes. He discusses 212 cases in the last 200 years, of which 46 are well-documented and authenticated by physicians. Nahm finds evidence for an anomalous process that may be need to be accounted for by non-causal modelling.<sup>[16]</sup>

## **Select Parapsychological Works by Topic**

Nahm has published two German-language books and numerous articles in German and English about the above topics and others in psychical research. A complete list of his works may be found on his website [here](#).

### **Books**

*Evolution und Parapsychologie* [Evolution and Parapsychology] (2007). Norderstedt, Germany: Books on Demand.

*Wenn die Dunkelheit ein Ende findet. Terminale Geistesklarheit und andere Phänomene in Todesnähe* [When Darkness Comes to an End: Terminal Lucidity and other Phenomena in Near-Death States] (2012). Amerang, Germany: Crotona.

### **Papers and Chapters**

#### **Near-Death Experiences**

With Weibel, A. (2020). [The significance of autoscopies as a time marker for the occurrence of near-](#)

[death experiences](#). *Journal of Near-Death Studies* 38, 26-50.

[Reflections on the context of near-death experiences](#) (2011). *Journal of Scientific Exploration*, 25, 453-478.

[The Tibetan Book of the Dead: Its history and controversial aspects of its contents](#) (2011). *Journal of Near-Death Studies* 29, 373-98.

### **Terminal Lucidity**

With Mashour, G.A., Frank, L., Batthyany, A., Kolanowski, A.M., Schulman-Green, D., Greyson, B., Pakhomov, S., Karlawish, J., & Shah, R.C. (2019). [Paradoxical lucidity: A potential paradigm shift for the neurobiology and treatment of advanced dementias](#). *Alzheimer's & Dementia* 15, 1107-1114.

With Greyson, B., Kelly, E.W., & Haraldsson, E. (2012). Terminal lucidity: A review and a case collection. *Archives of Gerontology and Geriatrics* 55, 138-42.

[Terminal lucidity in people with mental illness and other mental disability: An overview and implications for possible explanatory models](#) (2009). *Journal of Near-Death Studies* 28, 87-106.

### **Reincarnation Studies**

Implications of reincarnation cases for biology (2019). In *Signs of Reincarnation. Exploring Beliefs, Cases and Theory* by J.G. Matlock. Lanham, Maryland, USA: Rowman & Littlefield, 273-87.

With Hassler, D. (2011). [Thoughts about thought bundles: A commentary on Jürgen Keil's paper 'Questions of the reincarnation type'](#). *Journal of Scientific Exploration* 25, 305-18.

### **Physical Mediumship and Hauntings**

[Out of thin air? Apport studies performed between 1928 and 1938 by Elemér Chengery Pap](#) (2019). *Journal of Scientific Exploration* 33, 661-705.

Historical perspective: Justinus Kerner's case study into the 'prison spook' in Weinsberg and spooky actions at a distance in 1835-1836 (2019). In *N equals 1. Single Case Studies in Anomalistics*, ed. by G. Mayer. Zürich: LIT Verlag, 153-200.

[Selected aspects of Carlos Mirabelli's mediumship](#) (2017). *Journal of Scientific Exploration* 31, 457-66.

With Ludwiger, I. von (2016). [Apport phenomena of medium Herbert Baumann \(1911-1998\): Report on personal experiences](#). *Journal of Scientific Exploration* 30, 337-58.

[Further comments about Kai Mügge's alleged mediumship and recent developments](#) (2016). *Journal of Scientific Exploration* 30, 56-62.

### **Vitalism and Biology**

Ganzheitsbiologische Strömungen im Umfeld der Philosophie von Hans Driesch [Currents of holistic biology in the context of Hans Driesch's philosophy] (2021). In *Hans Driesch und die Natur des Lebens* [Hans Driesch and the Nature of Life], ed. by S. Krall, M. Nahm, & H-P. Waldrich. Zug: Graue Edition, 143-201.

### **Miscellaneous**

With Rousseau, D., & Greyson, B. (2017). Discrepancy between cerebral structures and cognitive functioning: A review. *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease* 205, 967-72.

[Mysterious ways: The riddle of the homing ability in dogs and other vertebrates](#) (2015). *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 79, 140-55.

With Navarini, A.A. & Kelly, E.W. (2013). [Canities subita: A reappraisal of evidence based on 196 case reports published in the medical literature](#). *International Journal of Trichology* 5, 63-68.

## Select Media Appearances

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Godfrey, A. (2021). [‘The clouds cleared’: What terminal lucidity teaches us about life, death and dementia](#). *The Guardian*, 23 February.

Jolis, A. (2016). [The medical mystery of hair that whitens overnight](#). *The Atlantic*, 20 September 20.

Mendoza, M.A. (2018). [Life’s last rally: Terminal lucidity. A mystery at the deathbed](#). *Psychology Today*, 10 October.

Peskin, S.M. (2017). [The gentler symptoms of dying](#). *New York Times*, 11 July 11.

Tsakiris, A. (2015). [Alzheimer patient rises from deathbed, regains memory to recite poem, then passes away](#). Posted on Skeptiko: Science and Spirituality, 9 June. [Podcast, with transcripts of excerpts.]

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## Literature

Alvarado, C. (2017). [People in Parapsychology: XXXII: Michael Nahm](#). [Blogpost.]

Mashour, G., Frank, L., Batthyany, A., Kolanowski, A., Nahm, M., Schulman-Green, D., Greyson, B., Pakhomov, S., Karlawish, J., Shah. R. (2019). [Paradoxical lucidity: A potential paradigm shift for the neurobiology and treatment of severe dementias](#). *Alzheimers & Dementia* 15. 1107-14.

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Nahm, M. (2014). [The development and the phenomena of a circle for physical mediumship](#). *Journal of Scientific Exploration* 28, 229-283.

Nahm, M. (2015). Mysterious ways: The riddle of the homing ability in dogs and other vertebrates. *Journal of the Society of Psychical Research* 79, 144-155.

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Nahm, M. (2018). [Plötzliches und ungewöhnlich rasches Weißwerden von Haaren: Eine Übersicht über 212 Fallberichte aus der medizinischen Literatur der letzten 200 Jahre](#) (Sudden and unusually rapid whitening of hair: An overview of 212 case reports from the medical literature of the last 200 years). *Zeitschrift für Anomalistik* 18, 248-276. 10.23793/zfa.2018.248.

Nahm, M. (2019). Implications of reincarnation cases for biology. In J.G. Matlock (2019). *Signs of*

*Reincarnation. Exploring Beliefs, Cases and Theory*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield; 273-287.

Nahm, M., Rousseau, D., Greyson, B. (2017). Discrepancy between cerebral structure and cognitive functioning: A review. *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease* 205, 967-972.

## References

### Footnotes

- 1.^ Cited in Alvarado (2017).
- 2.^ Nahm (2007).
- 3.^ Alvarado (2017).
- 4.^ Nahm (2011).
- 5.^ Cited in Alvarado (2017).
- 6.^ Nahm (2009).
- 7.^ Cited by Alvarado (2017).
- 8.^ Mashour et al. (2019).
- 9.^ Nahm (2011).
- 10.^ Nahm & Weibel (2020), 26.
- 11.^ Nahm (2009).
- 12.^ Nahm et al. (2017).
- 13.^ Nahm (2019).
- 14.^ Nahm (2015).
- 15.^ Nahm (2014, 2016).
- 16.^ Nahm (2018).