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Neither the Same nor the Other

Cultural influences on the “near-death experiences”, especially in comparison of Western and Japanese (Buddhist) accounts

The term “near-death experiences” has become established in professional literature after several decades of scientific research on this interesting psychological and medical phenomenon, a phenomenon that has been of immense interest to anthropology, sociology, philosophy, as well as to religion and theology, especially when it refers to the actual “afterlife” – and it is precisely this particular possibility that has caused so much stir in numerous academic fields. In his famous book *Life after Life*, 1975, Raymond Moody advocates a thesis that visions often reported by persons who were brought back to life after having been clinically dead for a short period of time are, in fact, actual glimpses in the hereafter, i.e. they are not merely fanciful reveries caused by the proximity of imminent death, but rather fore-experiences of the afterlife. The main argument for believing in the “objective” validity of these experiences lies primarily in the fact that despite their individual differences they all convey certain structural similarities, for example (although not necessarily appearing in this particular order): the feeling of peace, separation of the soul from the body (i.e. out-of-body perception or, a term commonly used in esoteric circles, “astral projection”), temporally “narrowed”, panoramic perception of one’s life (i.e. life review)¹, meeting with ancestors and deceased relatives, passing of a certain obstacle (river, abyss etc.), entering a dark tunnel, seeing a bright light at the end of the tunnel, coming in touch with “beings of the light” (angel, God?) etc., and then returning to one’s former life, which usually consists of a deliberate or conscious decision to re-enter one’s body, sensations of bodily pain, and later vivid memories of the experience that spiritually transfigures a person, strengthens her faith, or at least alleviates the fear of dying.²

Raymond Moody introduced the term “near death experiences” (from this point on, I will omit the quotation marks) and concluded – and in this, was followed by several other authors (Kenneth Ring, M. B. Sabom, George Gallup, Cherie Sutherland etc.) – that the authenticity and “archetypal” similarity of such experiences are not in doubt, as the bulk of the available testimonies is extremely convincing – the main problem, however, lies in the

¹ The first and still by far the most famous report of an almost immediate “life review” is the account produced by the alpinist Albert Heim who, already at the end of the 19th century, provided an extremely detailed description of his fall from a mountain cliff: during the time of his fall – during those 5 to 10 seconds – the time felt greatly extended, so that he was able to go through all possible scenarios in his mind (he asked himself whether there are rocks or snow at the bottom, he contemplated if it would be better to get rid of his glasses but was unable to actually do so, he told himself that he must keep his backpack on just in case he survived the fall, he suspected that they will have to cancel his lectures, imagined how sad his relatives will be, and thought of different ways to comfort them etc.), and after that the whole “movie” of his life was projected in his memory with himself in the main role – in a brief second, his soul was flooded with hundreds and thousands of memory images, now harmoniously intertwined in a form of a “wonderful musical score”...and then, saved by fate (there actually *was* snow at the bottom), he started collecting similar stories from other people, which he then published, together with his personal report, in a newsletter of the Swiss alpine association under the title “Remarks on Fatal Falls”. In the last hundred years or so that have passed since Heim’s “life review” experience, hundreds if not thousands of similar reports have been collected.

² Michael de Montaigne also wrote about his tranquilizing “near-death experience” in his *Essays* (“On exercise”, II/6), see also: M. Uršič, *Sedmerke (Štirje časi, Poletje, 2nd part)*, pg. 247–51.

interpretation of these visions. Do they occur *here* or *there*? Are these, from a subjective point of view, perfectly “real dreams” actual experiential accounts of the existence of the hereafter, of heaven and hell, of *topoi* spoken of in holy texts? And lastly, even if we place them *out there*, is there really such a sharp divide between *here* and *there*? There are great spiritual traditions that deny the division between *this world* and *the other*, especially certain Buddhist schools, as will be clearly seen below. After several decades of research on this topic all these essential questions have remained unanswered, and that is why a neutral and ambiguous term “near death experiences” is still much preferred to certain more specific terms, such as “life after life” or even “after death experiences” (in opposition to “before death dreams”) etc.; all these other terms already predetermine the ontological or theological status of the phenomena in question.

Researchers of “life after life” (those mentioned above, as well as others), especially psychologists and physicians, usually focus on certain *common characteristics* of near death experiences in people who *differ* with regards to their education, personality, age etc., but usually share the same cultural background, i.e. live in the modern Western world. One of the reasons for this is that Western hospitals provide us, at least to a certain degree, with the possibility of documenting these elusive experiences. The second phase in the field of near death experience research was initiated by Carol Zaleski, a Harvard anthropologist, in her book *Otherworld Journeys: Accounts of Near-Death Experience in Medieval and Modern Times*, 1987. Zaleski compared near death experiences in the contemporary Western world with Medieval visions, from Dante’s *Divine Comedy* to actual pilgrimages to St. Patrick’s “Purgatory” in Ireland, which supposedly had a similar transformational effect on pilgrims as modern visions of people who come back to life after a short period of clinical death; furthermore, the iconography of visions from that period strongly resembles modern iconography with regards to motifs or at least structures, although it has to be pointed out that, in general, we are dealing here with two *very different periods* of Western culture. Does this new argument speak in favour of the objective validity of near death experiences, of “life after life”? Yes and no, since our conclusions, again, depend on our interpretations of these visions or from our understanding of reality as such: for example, in the context of the Jungian understanding of the “collective unconscious”, the intersubjective similarity of experiences is not only the evidence of their “archetypal nature”, but also of their “objective reality” – while the vast majority of more “realistic” scientists (especially physicians) deny the validity of reasoning that draws conclusions from the phenomenological similarity of visions to their afterlife reality.³

Comparison of Japanese and Western near death experiences

The third phase in the near death experience research was, in my opinion, started (or at least highlighted from a different perspective) by Ornella Corazza, a researcher of Eastern cultures at the University of London and the author of an extremely interesting book *Near-Death Experiences: Exploring the Mind-Body Connection*, 2008, which focuses on an intercultural comparison of near death visions or phenomena. Corazza conducted most of her research in

³ Scientists have, among other things, tried to temporally compare introspective reports of visions of their patients who came back to life after a short period of clinical death with objectively registered data from the encephalogram – in order to determine, whether these experiences precede the interval of clinical death – but haven’t been able to find anything conclusive, as it is temporally impossible to “objectively” pinpoint patient’s visions on the basis of introspective reports. Phenomenological time doesn’t always coincide with physical or physiological time – a fact that is heavily supported by psychological, and also philosophical, investigations of time.

Japan, and that is why the main subject of her book is a comparison of near death experience accounts in the Japanese and Western traditions. The author found both the similarities and differences between the two cultures: the main similarities are the feeling of tranquility, out-of-body perception, meeting with one's ancestors, meeting with the Light, and the way of returning to bodily life; but Corazza also pointed out certain obvious differences: for example, in Japan, one rarely experiences the unfolding of one's "life story" or passing through a dark tunnel; also, the Light is normally not considered a "being", but rather a boundless light in "space", "light of emptiness" – before this "final goal" Eastern visions normally include rivers and ponds, beautiful flowers and greenery, mesmerizing gardens and parks, probably similar to those beautiful Kyoto Zen gardens that enchant us with their simple perfection; on the other hand, "negative experiences" (for example, encounters with evil demons) seem to be much more frequent in Japan than in the West – and such evil entities can also be seen in Japanese temples (in the last couple of centuries definitely more often than in the West). Let's examine three such accounts provided by Corazza:

"As I got closer, at the very end of the other side of the river, I saw my mother who passed away 18 months ago. I could see only her face because a group of children monks, dressed in white and black, masked the rest of her body. The children were very noisy. I moved closer, to see my mother. She looked very worried and she said: 'Don't come here! Go back!' So I turned back and regained consciousness in the hospital. At that very moment, I heard a nurse calling my name." (Corazza, p. 60)

"My father came to greet me. We walked together for a little while and then he left me and crossed over a 'rainbow bridge'. I was about to follow him but he told me not to do so. He said to me: 'Go home, go home!' Then, I woke up." (*Ibid.*, p. 61)

Mr. C. had a vision of an empty and strange place. He said: "No one was there. No living things were around me. I remember that I felt serene but lonely. I was amazed at how vast the space was! It was neither too bright nor too dark. I was just there was no living thing there. [...] I was something glittering in the distance and went to it. Next thing I knew [*sic!*] there was a bright huge wall standing in my way. It was made of golden light. There was something I had to go across between the wall and me. [...] Everything happened very quickly. I remember that I saw everything that I had experienced. [...] I gradually began to lose the sense of distinguishing myself from the light. I was filled with everything. Then I thought something like: 'Would I be dead if the trend continues?', but 'I have achieved nothing in this life!' – and then Mr. C. returned to his earthly life. (see Corazza, p. 61-62)

It is obvious that these passages reveal certain similarities with near death experiences found in the West, for example: a call from a beloved person (mother, father) who sends the dying person back to life, or a vision of a bridge, of some obstacle etc. What about "life review"? Some of Mr. C.'s statements – for example: "Everything happened very quickly. I remember I saw everything that I had experienced," followed by: "I was filled with everything" – could be interpreted to mean that, in his near death experience, Mr. C. had a so-called "life review" experience, as it is often reported by those who recovered from clinical death in the West. This assumption is partly correct, but, as Corazza points out, the "experience of everything" is more of an exception than a rule in Japanese and Eastern visions. But, judging from the cultural and spiritual context of the Japanese imaginary of the "hereafter" as a whole, I believe that it would be premature to equate Western and Eastern visions of "everything", since in the East the "experience of everything" isn't limited solely to everything one personally experiences in the course of one's individual life, but, rather, it refers to the "experience of Everything", i.e. everything that lives and is – and this is the

crucial difference between the East and the West which will be the main focus of our further discussion.

Given the established differences between the Eastern and Western types of near death experiences, are we in a position to conclude the following: first, that the “otherworldly” visions are culture-dependent, and second and *per consequentiam*, that such visions stem from our present lives, i.e. that they constitute no proof for the existence of afterlife? Corazza’s answer is far from straightforward; instead, it is very subtle, and in this regard wholly in tune with the subtlety of the very topic it tries to tackle: she gives an affirmative answer to the first question, and a negative answer to the second one. According to Corazza, the fact that near death experiences are culture-dependent doesn’t necessarily mean that they can be reduced to dream-like fore-death hallucinations. How so? With regards to the reality of visions in question, Corazza feels that such experiences tell us more about the relationship between the soul and the body than about the “real hereafter” – they tell us that our “spiritual body” (even though the latter might not consist of some ethereal, esoteric substance) is not limited by the boundaries of our skin, but rather transcends our bodily limits and is, in some sort of “life place”, deeply connected with the world. In the concluding paragraphs of her book she states:

“The idea that we are extended in space beyond our conventional boundaries has been little explored in Western thought [...] As Michael Murphy has pointed out in *The Future of the Body* (1992), the body is endowed with extraordinary capacities, the manifestation of which makes us aware of our general ignorance about the reaches of human nature. [...] The challenge of the future will be to gather together evidence of our extraordinary ability to connect with the universe, so that it can be seen and known as a whole. Fundamental to this new perspective is an Asian view of embodiment according to which the body cannot be considered apart from place (*basho*), which represents the “ground of our being”. [...] In many ways, the value of these experiences goes far beyond the question of scientific proof of an afterlife and brings us directly to our immediate experience of the here-and-now and the sense of meaning and purpose that we may experience in this life. It also goes beyond reductionism and the attempt to locate the soul or consciousness in some part of the brain. Even more profoundly, the experience can suggest to us that what we label “I” is only a small part of a deeper intelligence that is immanent within all creation.” (Corazza, 139)

The philosophical role model for Corazza’s non-dualist and non-reductionist interpretation of near death experiences is Nishida Kitarō, the founder of the Kyoto phenomenological school, who expressed one’s “place-in-the-world” (a phrase reminiscent of Heidegger’s “being-in-the-world”, *In-der-Welt-Sein*) with a Japanese word *basho*, “place” or “location”. Corazza also refers to Merleau-Ponty’s “body-in-the-world”: a “body-scheme” from which “intentional threads” are spread, as we can read in *The Phenomenology of Perception* (1945) – and it is in this “subtle” sense that near death experiences have a certain epistemic, perhaps even religious value. However, Corazza doesn’t feel that these reports constitute a proof for the survival of the soul after bodily death; quite the contrary, they indicate the inseparable unity of the body and the soul – the “spirituality of the body” and the “physicality of the soul”. In the background of her thought lies a fundamentally monist formula: this life = afterlife, *here is there*. A theist will most likely disagree with such an explanation and will probably claim that it still tries to reduce near- or even after-death experiences on fore-death dreams – I, however, as a pantheist *sui generis*, believe that the phenomenological approach – be it in the Western or the Eastern variety – provides an interpretation of near-death experiences that prevents them from being reduced on some speculative explanatory scheme, but, at the same time, *takes them seriously*.

This realization could be supplemented with a bit more speculative assumption that a dying person probably doesn't care whether she is dreaming or actually perceiving a "higher reality", because even if near death experiences are merely dreams for *us*, they are the only reality for *those* who are about to leave this world and are no longer capable of using their bodily senses. I wonder: is this not enough? Do we really have to explore, explain, and analyze such visions, even if from a phenomenological perspective? Wouldn't it be correct to say that everything has its time and season, that there is "a time for birth and death", as we read in Ecclesiastes? Why do we want to *understand* this last secret while we're still "here"? Is it because for as long as we live we have to constantly ask ourselves: "What is the truth?" Despite this insatiable curiosity, I will, in the discussion that follows, leave the question of the "hereafter" reality of near death experiences in the so-called phenomenological "bracket" (*epoché*), and focus on a question that, in my opinion, is extremely interesting and important, and can be posed *within* the horizon of our "possible experience": why is there, in contrast to the vast majority of Western accounts, usually *no* "life review" in Eastern, particularly Buddhist and especially Japanese near death experiences? Can this be explained with differences between the Eastern and the Western spirit, between Buddhism and Christianity? I believe it can; furthermore, I'm convinced that such comparison can tell us a lot more about our own conceptions, thoughts and beliefs on life and death, nature and spirit. I feel that Buddhism, although its home ground is far removed from us, can at least indirectly help us solve the crisis that plagues Christian eschatology and with it a significant part of Western religiosity and spirituality in general. Let us try to think through the connection between Buddhism and Eastern near-death experiences, especially the intriguing lack of "life review" in the East.

What is the meaning of transmigration in Buddhism?

Buddhism is a salvific teaching, first of ethical and contemplative, later also of religious nature. The Buddha's teaching (*dhamma* in Pali, *dharma* in Sanskrit) helps the "enlightened one" (*buddha*) reach the salvation from *samsara* and the attainment of *nirvana* (the Pali term *nibbana* means "to blow out", "extinguish") by following the "Noble Eightfold Path". *Samsara*, the "phenomenal world", can be understood as a cosmic cycle of life and death, constantly driven by the desire for embodiment, the insatiable desire that always leads to new and, at the same time, old suffering. Buddha, in his famous *Sermon at Benares* revealed the "Four Noble Truths" to the world: 1. that suffering (*dukkha*) *exists*; 2. that suffering is *created*; 3. that suffering is *finite*; 4. that there is *The Eightfold Path* that leads to the end of suffering. The Pali term *dukkha* is usually translated as "suffering", although it has a much broader meaning: it would be more appropriate to describe it as the "unpleasantness of being", as the "lack of perfection", as a permanent desire that leads to constant new embodiments. *Dukkha* is the basis, the unquestionable starting point of the Buddhist "old teaching" (*Theravada*), especially "The Small Vehicle" school (*Hinayana*), which is the main reason why this rigorous old teaching has been highly respected in the West, but, because of its primal austerity and cosmic "pessimism", has also remained relatively distant and quite unacceptable for most Westerners: why should we see only suffering and no joy in life? In addition, *Hinayana* is a very lonesome path towards *nirvana*. Later, its conceptual and contemplative rigor was softened in *Mahayana*, "The Great Vehicle", which introduced *bodhisattvas*, enlightened beings who, not unlike angels, return to *samsara* in order to help unenlightened beings, since no being can be said to be fully enlightened until all beings have reached enlightenment. This beautiful thought is, on the one hand, very close to the original Christian feeling, the genuine love between human beings (*agape*), but, on the other hand, its

Christian version (*apokatastasis*) is deemed heretical in Catholicism as it denies the eternity of Hell.

Quite different from the “old teaching” (especially *Hinayana*) is the Chinese *Chan* (from Sanskrit *dhyana*, meditation) and especially Japanese *Zen* Buddhism. Approximately 800 years ago, *Zen* spread from the Asian continent to the Japanese islands, and it introduced a radical shift in the understanding of certain Buddhist notions: its experiential and conceptual starting point was no longer the experience or knowledge of all-pervading, cosmic suffering, since it perceived *dukkha* predominantly as a feeling of existential imperfection or unwholesomeness. The main *Zen* “path of learning” is contemplation, “just sitting” (*zazen*), whose goal is the attainment of *satori* (“enlightenment”), by means of which one is able to solve the existential imperfection in “perfect emptiness”, or more accurately, in the unspeakable and transrational “full nothingness” (*shunyata*). I believe that this “relocation” of the experiential and conceptual starting point is the main reason why *Zen* Buddhism, despite its cultural remoteness, is closer to the Western way of thinking than older Buddhist teachings. The key notions in both, however, are cosmic time, transmigration, “migration of souls”. In Buddhism, the main principle of transmigration – the law that defines causes and effects of life-and-death cycles – is the old Vedic *karma* (*kamma* or “good deed” in Pali). The cosmic “law of karma” regulates reincarnation, the new embodiment of one’s “soul”, on the basis of one’s past lives – but, as it will be seen later in the article, in Buddhism, the traditional reincarnation doctrine has been significantly modified, first by being purified of its Vedic-mythological contents, and then, and even more importantly, by the introduction of the idea that the transmigrating “spirit” is actually *anatta*, i.e. “non-soul”, more specifically, “non-self”.

Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, the most well-known interpret of *Zen* Buddhism in the West, in his book *Mysticism: Christian and Buddhist* (1957) – in which he compares, albeit not always accurately, *Zen* patriarchs with the Christian mystic Meister Eckhart – ponders, among other things, the meaning of transmigration in Buddhism: “Does Buddhism teach transmigration? If it does, how does it work? Does the soul really transmigrate?” (Suzuki, p. 100) His analysis of these issues is very complex, but before I present his final answer at the end of this section, I will try to answer the question myself (my answer will be quite similar to his) by shortly examining some key passages from the Buddhist literature.

Of many legends about the Buddha, the “awakened” prince Gautama Siddharta, who lived and spread his teaching in the 5th century BC, one has a special place in the Buddhist literature. I’m referring to the legend of that great night when the Buddha attained nirvana in meditation under the “tree of enlightenment” (*bodhi* tree). Thus, for example, in *The Acts of the Buddha (Buddhacarita)*, a book written by an Indian poet *Aśvaghosa* living in the 1st century, we read that on the night in question, before attaining enlightenment – but after he had already conquered the evil spirit *Mara*, the tempter, who tried to persuade him to return to life – the Buddha went through four stages or “night watches”. The shorter version of the legend found in *Aśvaghosa*’s poem (translated by the famous English professor of Buddhism Edward Conze) claims that Buddha “[i]n the first watch of the night [...] recollected the successive series of his former births. ‘There was I so and so; that was my name; deceased from there I came’ – in this way he remembered thousands of births, as though living them over again...” (Conze, p. 49) A longer account of Buddha’s four night watches can be found in the *Tipitaka*, the collection of the “three baskets” of old Buddhism that were written in the Pali language (i.e. they form the *Pali cannon*). The account can be found in the first basket,

known as the *Vinaya Pitaka*, whose main theme is the monastic life.⁴ In a certain section of *Vinaya Pitaka*, where the Buddha teaches monks how to contemplate, he tells a certain Brahman:

“With the mind thus composed, quite purified, quite clarified, without blemish, without defilement, grown soft and workable, fixed, immovable, I directed my mind to the knowledge and recollection of former habitations. I remembered a variety of former habitations, thus: one birth, two births ... or fifty or a hundred or a thousand births; or many an aeon of integration, disintegration, integration-disintegration; such a one was I by name, having such and such a clan, such and such a colour, so was I nourished, such and such pleasant and painful experiences were mine, so did the span of life end. Passing away from this, I came to be in another state where I was such a one by name ... so did the span of life end. Passing away from this, I arose here. Thus I remember divers former habitations in all their modes and details. This, Brahmin, was the first knowledge attained by me in the first watch of that night; ignorance was dispelled, knowledge arose, darkness was dispelled, light arose even as I abided diligent, ardent, self-resolute. This, Brahmin, was my first successful breaking forth, like a chick’s from the egg-shell.” (see Conze 1990, 61)

Although the first reading of the cited paragraph leaves us with a strong impression that the key phrase in this first-person account of transmigration is “integration-disintegration” (and further study of Buddhism reveals that this is indeed the case), we cannot but feel deeply fascinated with the ability of a still-human mind (remember that, at this particular point, the Buddha hadn’t yet reached the enlightenment) to go, with perfect clarity, through all of one’s past lives in one’s memory, although several thousands had passed before the present moment of the “first night watch”.⁵ How is this possible? How can a living human being – since the Buddha at this point wasn’t a god (yet); although he was later worshipped as the highest Deity in many Asian countries – recall exact details of all of “his” past, of all the “passages” from deaths into new births? In the West, we would say that his personal memory goes back “all the way to Adam and Eve”, or, as some modern scientists might say, “all the way to the first representative of the *homo sapiens* species” (maybe even further back).⁶ The

⁴ Some Buddhists and/or experts on Buddhism, e.g. Čedomil Veljačić (*alias* Bhikku Nanayivako), believe *Vinaya Pitaka* actually belongs to the second “basket” in *Tipitaka*, thus following the first, and undoubtedly the most important «basket» of the Pali canon, *Sutta Pitaka*, in which Buddha’s speeches or »sayings« (*suttas*) are collected in multiple collections (*nikaya*) (see Veljačić, p. 223-24).

⁵ A similar story of Buddha’s recollection of his past lives, this time a very specific memory of his being “the great steward”, can be found in *Maha Govinda Sutta* (the 19th sutta of *Digha Nikaya*, the collection of long discourses), where a pupil Pancasikha asks Buddha: “Do you remember this, Lord?” – “I do, Pancasikha. At that time I was the Brahmin, the Great Steward, and I taught those disciples the path to union with the Brahma-world. However, Pancasikha, that holy life does not lead to disenchantment, to dispassion, to cessation, to peace, to super-knowledge, to enlightenment, to *Nibbana*, but only to birth in the Brahma-world...» (*Digha Nikaya*, transl. by: M. Walshe, p. 313)

⁶ Buddhaghosa (“Buddha’s voice”), the most important Pali commentator of old Buddhism, wrote extensively on meditative “techniques” of remembering past lives. He wrote a famous work in the 5th century in Sri Lanka, a treaty entitled *Visuddhimagga* (*The Path of Purification*). In this work, Buddhaghosa suggests that you should start the meditative practice of recollection by visualizing – in a temporally inverted manner (!) – how you came to this meditation and what you did before that: last hour, last day, last month, last year etc., and by means of this reverse method you could supposedly arrive not only to the time of your birth, but, through the transmigrational “passage”, all the way back to your previous life etc. – I personally have to say that with the help of this particular exercise, although interesting in itself, I am unable to approach the period of my life when I was a baby (and I don’t attend psychoanalytic meetings), let alone any of my previous lives. Some people claim that they remember their past lives, at least parts of them (sometimes they infer about them from the *déjà vu*

modern reader will find this practically impossible: such an idea seems acceptable only on a mythological level, as a mere legend. But it would be interesting to ask ourselves whether the account of the Buddha's recollection of his past lives in the Buddhist canonic and post-canonic works, which have, generally speaking, grown quite apart from the old, "naïve" mythology, and have tapped deeper into the core of pure spirituality (the same holds true for the Vedic *Upanishads*), is meant literally, "realistically"? I don't think so, and I will try to explain why. In attempting to solve this enigma, however, we must first try to understand what the word "I" (1st person singular) means in the Buddha's speeches.

Anyone who is at least mildly familiar with the Buddhist literature knows that the essential part of Buddhism is *anatta* (in Sanskrit *anatman*), i.e. the doctrine of the "non-existence of ego". The already mentioned Zen Buddhist D.T. Suzuki points out: "What is universally recognized as Buddhist thought regardless of interpretation is the doctrine of *anatta* or *anatman*, that is the doctrine of non-ego" (*op. cit.*, p. 33). One of the best known Buddhist metaphors for the non-existence of ego is a carriage metaphor from the famous post-canonical text *The Questions of Milinda* (*Milindapanha*, 1st century). Milinda (Menandros) was a Greco-Bactrian king, one of the descendants of Alexander the Great, who ruled a part of the then India, and since Milinda, at least in this particular Buddhist text, cherishes the typical Greek "love of wisdom", he questions the reverend monk Nagasena on numerous points of his teaching. The text is actually a sort of Socratic dialogue in which king Milinda plays a role of a pupil and Nagasena that of a teacher. At the beginning of the second part of *Milindapanha*, which, in addition to the third part, is by far the most important from the philosophical perspective, Nagasena, when asked about his name by the king, replies that the name is "only a generally understood term, a designation in common use. For there is no permanent individuality (no soul) [*puggala*] involved in the matter." (*Milinda*, p. 40) Hearing the monk's reply, the king, together with all "the five hundred Yonakas [Greeks]" in his company, is of course surprised and demands additional explanation. In his reply, Nagasena evokes the metaphor of a carriage: what is the carriage the king used to arrive to the meeting? "Is it the pole that is the chariot? (...) Is it the axle that is the chariot? (...) Is it the wheels, or the framework, or the ropes, or the yoke, or the spokes of the wheels, or the goad, that are the chariot?" (*ibid.*, p. 43), asks Nagasena. The carriage is none of these things, of course, although it is composed of "all of these parts", and it is "on account of its having all these things - the pole, and the axle, the wheels, and the framework, the ropes, the yoke, the spokes, and the goad - that it comes under the generally understood term, the designation in common use, of 'chariot.'" (*ibid.*, p.44) - A Western philosopher might note: ah, nominalism, of course, one of the possible answers to the "problem of universals", or Hume's skepticism - we're familiar with that. But it's not quite so simple, since Buddhist "nominalism" is not simply a theoretical, scholastic "position", but a *position* in a much more binding, emphatic sense: a Buddhist really stands behind his views with his whole being - with all of his five *skandhas* (body, feelings, sensations, will and consciousness), i.e. "bundles" that make up his concrete "non-person". For our present purpose it is especially important that - if we simplify matters somewhat - it is *not* the *person* that transmigrates, since, on the existential level, "ego-as-a-person" doesn't exist at all; there are only mental and bodily processes influenced by carmic cycles, more specifically, there are *consequences* of all actions that I do in my life as a

experiences), but such claims are rightly exposed to rational criticism. For how can I tell whether some memory (picture, image, thought), which I cannot sensibly include in my present life, stems from one of *my* past lives?

psychophysical composition of five *skandhas*, i.e. as the (non)ego, as “the name-and-form” (*nama-rupa*).⁷ But more on this shortly.

Milindapanha is a great philosophical text because it doesn't simplify problems or dilemmas it poses and it doesn't reduce them to one dimension only, but rather tackles them “dialectically” (and it was precisely because of dialectics that *Milindapanha* played an important part in the establishment of the Buddhist school Madhyamaka, with Nagarjuna [2nd-3rd century] as its most important representative). When Nagasena talks to Milinda about transmigration, he is subtly “keeping the secret”, following the form of double negation (binegation; *nota bene*, this is not the same as the Hegelian “negation of negation”), i.e. the form of thinking expressed by neither/nor sentences. The author of *The Questions of Milinda*, whoever he or she was, was well aware of the importance and gravity of the Buddha's words on the awakened memories of past lives that were cited above from the canonical *Vinaya Pitaka*. It is interesting that this particular theme also occurs at the very beginning of *Milindapanha*, in its first part, which relates “the previous birth history of these two persons (Milinda and Nagasena)” (*Milinda*, pp. 3-4), but where by their “previous history [*pubba yoga*] is meant their Karma (their doings in this or previous lives).” (*ibid.*, p. 5) When reading the first part of *Milindapanha*, we get the impression that this is actually some sort of a mythological introduction to the central philosophical theme that follows in the second and the third part; the role of the “mythical hero” in this introductory narration is designated to Nagasena, whom the reader follows through his past lives, through his young years and his learning period, and up to his meeting with Milinda. Maybe the author himself, by recurring to the mythological form in this particular passage, wanted to imply that we shouldn't take memories of previous lives too literally, too “realistically”? Because later in the text, when discussing the chariot metaphor, we learn that the central point of Nagasena's teaching is precisely the principle of *anatta*, “non-ego” (“non-soul”, “non-person”), which is essential to Buddhism. In his answer to Milinda's aporetic question about who exactly is undergoing the process of transmigration (reincarnation), Nagasena, again, resorts to metaphors, which he calls for help – akin to the Buddha or, in our part of the world, to Plato or Jesus – whenever rational discourse is unable to express some complex existential truth, and this is usually the rule (and not the exception) in the realm of “the highest things”. The most well-known metaphor used by Nagasena is that of a lamp in the 17th chapter of the 2nd part under the title “The Succession of Phenomena”. The chapter begins with Milinda asking the following question: “He who is born, Nagasena, does he remain the same or become another?”, and the monk answers: “Neither the same nor another.” Milinda doesn't understand Nagasena's answer – this is probably also the problem faced by many contemporary philosophers who try to tackle the so-called “problem of personal identity” – and asks Nagasena to provide an illustration. The monk provides several illustrations, but the most beautiful is the one with the lamp and flame:

[Nagasena]: “Suppose a man, O king, were to light a lamp, would it burn the night through?”

[Milinda]: “Yes, it might do so.”

“Now, is it the same flame that burns in the first watch of the night, Sir, and in the second?”

⁷ It is interesting to note that there actually was a »personalist« school in Buddhism which opposed the doctrine of non-ego. The *Abhidharma-kośa* written by the famous Buddhist philosopher Vasubandhu (4th century) contains his dispute with an anonymous “personalist” who claimed – if we translate his ideas into Western terminology – that what is referred to as a “person” actually denotes a structural unity of the flow of mental processes, even though this structural unity (person) is not some actual ontological entity (see Conze, pp. 192-197). On a side note, this Buddhist “personalism” is closer to Kantian “transcendental apperception” and/or Husserlian “transcendental self” than to Christian personalism.

“No.”

“Or the same that burns in the second watch and in the third?”

“No.”

“Then is there one lamp in the first watch, and another in the second, and another in the third?”

“No. The light comes from the same lamp all the night through.”

“Just so, O king, is the continuity of a person or thing maintained (*dhammasantati*). One comes into being, another passes away; and the rebirth is, as it were, simultaneous. Thus neither as the same nor as another does a man go on to the last phase of his self-consciousness (*vinnana*).” (Milinda, pp. 63-64)

In the 22nd chapter of the second part of *Milindapanha* entitled “Questions on Consequences of Good and Bad Deeds” (traditionally speaking, “On the Law of Karma”) King Milinda returns to his original question, this time from a slightly different perspective: “What is it, Nāgasena, that is reborn?” – and the monk answers: “Name-and-form [mental and physical processes, *namarupa*] is reborn” (p. 71). Milinda wants a clearer answer, so he asks: “What, is it this same name-and-form that is reborn?” – and to this Nagaesena provides a wise, but also a highly rational answer that is then repeated (among new examples and metaphors) on several occasions later in the chapter:

“No: but by this name-and-form deeds are done, good or evil, and by these deeds (this Karma) another name-and-form is reborn.” (Ibid., p. 57)

Everything that exists is a process. No being is static, permanent, eternal etc., and for this reason anything that transmigrates, anything that reincarnates, cannot be understood as *I-myself* in the Cartesian sense – *but* other beings, other “names-and-forms” (i.e. other mental and physical processes) are *by no means foreign* to me as this-and-this living being, existing here-and-now. Transmigration, the cycle of life and death, is the process of “integration-disintegration” of “my” (i.e. basically *identical*, and not some foreign) karmic contents (works, thoughts, feelings, memories and, of course, atoms) that have assembled and will continue to assemble in other beings – we could say in “my other egos”. But there is no timeless, absolute Self in Buddhism – and this is the core teaching of the doctrine of *anatta* that opens up a window of opportunity for transcending *samsara* and attaining *nirvana*.⁸ I think that the ethical core of Buddhism can be expressed with the following idea: *other beings are not something that is truly separate from myself*, but are rather only other “names-and-forms” in the same cosmic process. In other words, *my “full emptiness” is the only real cosmic being*, being-that-is-not-being, since we can call it “nothing” (*sunyata*), but, again, not “nothing” in the sense of Aristotelian metaphysics and/or scholastic theology, because in Buddhism, especially in Zen, “nothing” is not a negation, but rather an *affirmation* of being.

Theravada Buddhism teaches us how to free ourselves from this attractive force of life, as can be clearly seen in the canonical scripture *Words of Wisdom*: “The streams (of craving) flow everywhere, and the creeper hoots up and establishes itself, so when you see the

⁸ Cf. the following verses of the previously mentioned Buddhist poet Buddhaghosa from the poem *Visuddhimagga* (XVI, 90), here translated in prose: “Mere suffering exists, no sufferer is found. The deed is, but no doer of the deed is there. Nibbāna is, but not the man that enters it. The path is, but no traveler on it is seen.” – Some theists, both in the East and West, denounce the Buddhist “non-existence of a person” with the argument that this negates ethics, especially reward and punishment for done deeds. I personally believe that this criticism of *anatta* is wrong or at least too weak, because it misunderstands what Buddhism is (it confuses the empirical ego with the “selfhood”), and it carries over the human law on the cosmic level, a very dubious move to say the least.

creeper shooting up, cut away its root with your understanding” (*Dhammapada*, 24, 7). As already mentioned, *Chan* and *Zen* differ significantly in this respect: they are much more “optimistic” in nature. However, somewhere along Buddhism’s long journey across the Asian spatio-temporal frontiers we find a very accurate account of the workings of this attractive life force, which prevents the deceased to reach the “clear light of emptiness” and pushes them into new incarnations, new births...

This description, this “otherworldly vision” is provided by the famous *Tibetan Book of the Dead* (*Bardo Thödol*), which, according to tradition, contains the teachings of Padma Sambhava (8th century), the founder of Tibetan Buddhism or Lamaism. The book was introduced to the Western world in the 20th century when, in 1927, W. Y. Evans-Wentz published an English translation by Lama Kazi Dawa Samdup. Generally speaking, the Lamaist teaching in the *Bardo Thödol* originates in classical Indian Buddhism and accords well with it, but with regards to transmigration, which is the central theme of our present encounter with Buddhism, this surprising account, this guide for the deceased in the state of *bardo*, i.e. in an intermittent state between death and new birth, contains unique visionary and spiritual elements that differ significantly from the canonical Buddhist notion of *anatta*, “non-ego” or “non-soul”. It seems that *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* is closer to Christian eschatology than to *Theravada* Buddhism on the one or *Zen* and others on the other hand, and maybe this is the main reason for its popularity in the West, which became even more prominent because of the famous “Psychological Commentary” written by Jung.⁹

When I first read *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* in my younger years, I was practically hypnotized by it: it felt as if it spoke of a “too-vivid dream”.¹⁰ At that point in my life, I wondered whether it was possible that these words had been actually written from memory, that they were based on vivid memory images of the state after death or before life? Lama, the spiritual teacher in *Bardo Thödol*, speaks to (according to the tradition, whispers in the ear of) a dying person, and even afterwards, i.e. when that person is already dead, continues to offer advice to the deceased on how to face visions and feelings in the “intermittent phase”, so that the deceased may free herself from *samsara* and attain “the pure light of emptiness” (*nirvana*); however, if the deceased is unable to do that or has missed “the right moment”, she should pick – with the help of her will, “vigilance” and “awareness” – the best possible reincarnation. “Although mode and place of our new birth are determined by *carminic* forces, the characteristics of our new birth can be influenced by our state of mind at the moment of death [...and that is why] a skilled meditator can use his own death to achieve great spiritual fulfillment,” wrote the 14th Dalai Lama Tenzin Gyatso in his address to the Slovene translation of *Bardo Thödol*. What I personally find most surprising, and this has already been mentioned above, is the fact that not only is our new birth influenced by “the state of mind at the moment of death”, as written by the Dalai Lama, but that, according to the book, the intermittent state, *bardo*, is extended so as to include several (this-worldly) days or even weeks after death. – And today I wonder again: *how is this possible?* Because if all this is true, then the *bardo* state is not defined only by some impersonal karmic-attractive force, the cosmic “attraction to life” (*upadana*), as taught by old Buddhism, but rather it would seem that some personal entity has to be preserved after one’s death, at least some remainder of consciousness and will of the deceased person, so that her “soul” (*atman?*) could follow Lama’s instructions. And isn’t this but a variation of Christian “individual” eschatology, albeit with no Ultimate Judge? For in the *bardo* state every soul has to judge herself, because,

⁹ Carl Gustav Jung, *Psychological Commentary to Bardo Thödol* (1960), in English translation: *Collected Works*, Vol. XI.

¹⁰ See M. Uršič, *Enivetok* (1981), p. 33–38.

in the end, it is the “vigilance” of her own consciousness and will that decides whether she will be saved or not; but if unable to reach the final salvation, she can still decide how and where her reincarnation will take place. Already in my younger years, when I was reading *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* for the first time, I noticed certain parallels with near-death visions found in Moody’s *Life after life*: the illuminating light, and especially “the great divide” (crossroads), where the soul has to decide between death or returning back to life, and that peculiar feeling of body’s attraction, which lures the soul back to itself (or, in *Bardo Thödol*, to the new incarnation). I have given the matter a lot of thought, but the older I get, the less likely the *bardo* state seems to me.

And when now, after several decades, I am re-reading *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* (and am, according to the iron logics of time and statistics, closer to death than I was when I first read it), I am still fascinated by it, but again find myself wondering, perhaps even more persistently, if its teachings could actually be *true*? Because if they were literally true, there would be something seriously wrong with our attitude towards death and the deceased – maybe, in the first instance, the fact that before the end of those couple of days or weeks during which the souls of the deceased are supposedly roaming freely in *bardo*, we shouldn’t be burning the bodies of the dead? But this objection seems absurd to most of us, and it very probably is, because it is based on an odd and a hardly rational presupposition that my consciousness and my will can outlive my bodily death. (“Additional hypotheses” are possible, of course, such as the possibility that, after death, every soul acquires a new, “astral” body that enables it to roam freely in *bardo*, but this supposition seems even more unrealistic, and, in the end, fails to solve the mind-body enigma). If, however, *Bardo Thödol* is, in its entirety or to a large extent, “poetry”, a spiritual metaphor, then the issue of its “realistic value” is not that pertinent, but in that case, of course, it loses some its hypnotic appeal. Perhaps the wisest thing to do is to say the *bardo* state is “neither real nor unreal”.

Let us now return to the question posed by the Zen Buddhist D. T. Suzuki: “Does Buddhism teach transmigration? If it does, how does it work? Does the soul really transmigrate?” (Suzuki, p. 109). It is obvious from classical Buddhist texts, especially from *Milindapanha* (but also others), that transmigration in Buddhism doesn’t refer simply to transmigration of souls, as those with poor or no knowledge of Buddhist tradition seem to assume, but rather it means that *karmas* of the deceased person, i.e. effects of her “mental and physical processes”, re-connect to form another being, which, however, remains identical with the first one on a deeper, cosmic level. *Samsara* is thus a cycle of “integration-disintegration”, while *nirvana* means simply “stepping out” of this cycle, i.e. salvation or “extinguishing” of *karma*. This, in my opinion, is a fairly accurate doctrinary response to the question of the meaning of transmigration in Buddhism. But far more than its “metaphysical” or ontological dimension, which is strongly connected with the Indian (or broader Asian) spiritual and cultural environment – because it actually presupposes the Vedic law of karma, cyclical time etc. –, a special value of the Buddhist doctrine for a Western reader lies in its *ethical dimension*. This ethical meaning is important not only from the perspective of some hypothetical otherworldly afterlife, but also for our *present* lives – lives that we are living here-and-now. This is exactly what Suzuki is telling us: “Viewing the idea of transmigration from this standpoint, is it not interesting to realize that we are practicing this transmigration in every moment of our lives, instead of going through it after death and waiting for many a *Kalpa* (aeon) to elapse?” (*ibid.*, p. 119) In other words, from the direct experience of the “present” transmigration of soul or spirit travelling through different “lives” – from childhood, through adulthood, to old age – in a single lifetime, a unique feeling awakens in our hearts, a feeling of *empathy*, compassion, co-feeling, co-thinking, co-belonging with other beings, with all beings of this world – even more, with all beings of this boundless cosmos!

The process of the awakening of this “cosmic consciousness” is the essential part of our dealing with foreign, different cultures, cultures that are vastly remote to our personal *Lebenswelt*, and whose spiritual teachings and cultural achievements seem so strange to us. Thus, regardless of my place of birth – be it in the West or East, North or South – I say to myself: “Open up, spread your wings, become the World!” It is precisely in the understanding that I am *neither the same nor another* (or, if we turn this thought “dialectically” on its head: that I am *both, the same and another*) that the deepest, salvific teaching of Buddhism, Christianity, art, philosophy etc. lies.

If we now return from this general, yet also highly personal realization to the question posed in the first part of this essay, namely the question about the connection between near-death experiences (especially those from the Japanese tradition, which were examined by Ornella Corazza) and the Buddhist understanding of “afterlife”, i.e. transmigration, focusing especially on reasons for the lack of “life review” in the East – I can provide a short and brief answer: in Eastern, say Japanese, but also Indian or Chinese near-death phenomena the “life review” would simply be too long because it would have to contain the whole “transmigration cycle”! For a Zen or Theravada Buddhist “the sequence of events” in individual life is so important that it would have to be repeated in the form of a farewell “movie”, because in Buddhism an individual human being, i.e. an individual “name-and-form” (*nama-rupa*) is only a fragment of a bigger and deeper cosmic process – and this whole which is “always open” is what “really counts”.

Survival of “my other selves”

Derek Parfit, an Oxford philosopher, wrote a voluminous and complex philosophical book *Reasons and Persons* (1984), in which he struggles with the problem of “personal identity” and refers to, albeit indirectly, the Buddhist conception of “sequence of events” or the “non-ego” (*anatta*) doctrine, which he then develops into the philosophy of many “selves”. Parfit gained recognition already in the early 1970’s with the publication of an article entitled *Personal Identity* (1971); in his book, *Reasons and Persons*, he specifies and elaborates the main ideas covered in that article. At the very beginning of the book, in a short introduction, he provides a brief sketch of the contents of the book and explains the meaning of its title:

Like my cat, I often simply do what I want to do. I am then not using an ability that only persons have. We know that there are reasons for acting, and that some reasons are better or stronger than others. One of the main subjects of this book is a set of questions about what we have reason to do. I shall discuss several theories. Some of these are moral theories, others are theories about rationality.

We are particular people. I have my own life, you have yours. What do these facts involve? What makes me the same person throughout my life, and a different person from you? And what is the importance of these facts? What is the importance of the unity of each life, and of the distinction between different lives, and different persons? These questions are the other main subject of this book.

My two subjects, reasons and persons, have close connections. I believe that most of us have false beliefs about our own nature, and our identity over time, and that, when we see the truth, we ought to change some of our beliefs about what we have reason to do. We ought to revise our moral theories, and our beliefs about rationality. In the first part of the book I give other arguments for similar conclusions. (Parfit [1], p. ix)

It is obvious from the very introduction that Parfit deals with the problem of personal identity in a rational, analytical, almost scientific manner. This, on the one hand, is the main advantage of his approach, but on the other hand, such an approach also has very specific shortcomings (if compared, for example, to the Buddhist meditation on *anatta*). With this proviso in mind, we will follow Parfit's analytical path, a path that is much closer to the Western reader than the Eastern meditation, and will first ask ourselves – keeping in mind all that has been said about the Buddhist concept of “non-ego” – is Parfit, when speaking of “the problem of survival”, talking about the survival of “person” or of “ego”? And how can we even distinguish between the two? In Western philosophy in general and in Christian Personalism in particular, a person is believed to be *more* than a self: supposedly, the term “person” refers to that individual, *unique* subject who is aware of herself, of her identity in time; a person experiences and understands herself as a “carrier” of her memories and actions, for which she is responsible etc.; we don't normally attribute these characteristics to a self, but usually perceive it in the Cartesian sense as a “pure” epistemic subject. In other words, the identity or sameness of a self is believed to be a necessary, but not a sufficient condition for the identity of a person – or, if we turn that round: the identity of a person is *not* a necessary condition for the identity of a self. In this particular context, an interesting question emerges, namely how exactly does Parfit understand life after death – as a survival of a person, a self or something else?

Philosophical reflection on personal identity starts with the question of the criterion for its maintenance: what is it that makes *me* stay the *same person* throughout this life or perhaps even after death? There is no consensus about the final answer among analytical philosophers, although many modern day philosophers follow John Locke who believed that the key factor in the maintenance of personal identity is the continuity of personhood – more precisely, the *possibility* of the continuity of mental states in the flow of time (because the actual continuity of consciousness is broken during sleep, but I still remain the same person) – and this continuity is made possible by *memory*. Three centuries ago, Locke contemplated, among other things, the Pythagorean notion of the transmigration of souls; he wondered when – under what conditions – would it be possible for him to say that he is, for example, a reincarnated Socrates – and his answer was: I would be (the same person as) Socrates if I *remembered* most of Socrates' life, the same way Socrates remembered his past life or the same way I remember my own.¹¹ *Nota bene*: Locke doesn't believe that in order to be a “reincarnated Socrates” it is essential for him to have *the same soul* as Socrates, i.e. a soul as it is understood in the Platonic, Christian or Cartesian sense. And many modern philosophers, at least of analytical tradition, accept Locke's criterion for personal identity as the sameness of *mentality* (mental contents) in time, which is maintained by memory, but this criterion has its flaws as well; some, for example, would object that it actually contains circular reasoning, because memory *already presupposes* personal identity, instead of establishing it, while still others maintain that we don't remember many things we've experienced etc. That is why some analytical philosophers, for example Bernard Williams, propose *bodily* (i.e. brain) identity instead of mental identity as a criterion for personal identity. These philosophers, however, are in minority, but they make a good point, because we often feel that our thoughts and other mental contents are even more fleeting and passing than our bodies...but on the

¹¹ Ideas similar to those of the empiricist philosopher Locke can also be found in the great rationalist philosopher Leibniz. In the 34th paragraph of *Discourse on Metaphysics* (*Discours de métaphysique*, 1686) he states: “Suppose that some individual could suddenly become King of China on condition, however, of forgetting what he had been, as though being born again, would it not amount to the same practically, or as far as the effects could be perceived, as if the individual were annihilated, and a king of China were the same instant created in his place? The individual would have no reason to desire this.”

other hand we can object that this minority view fails to answer the question on *who* or *what* it is that connects bodily parts (and mental contents) in life as a whole, and, in addition, such “materialistic” view shuts down the possibility of life after death, because our bodies constantly change throughout our lives, let alone after our deaths...and so we could discuss *pro et contra* forever.

With regards to the criterion for personal identity, Parfit generally agrees with the majority view; in other words, he follows Locke, but he does so in a very unique way, as we will see shortly. Already in his article *Personal Identity* he points out that our usual criterion for personal identity in time can be expressed with the following belief:

Whatever happens between now and any future time, either I shall still exist, or I shall not. Any future experience will either be *my* experience, or it will not. (Parfit [2], p. 1)

– and then concludes that this belief, founded on the mental scheme *tertium non datur* (there is no third possibility), has many negative effects, both on a psychological as well as on a social and ethical level; for example, pronounced egocentrism, self-interest, desire to persevere at all cost and, consequently, fear of death and of being forgotten.

Following an established practice in modern cognitive philosophy, Parfit likes to make use of the so-called “thought experiments”. When addressing the issue of personal identity and its survival after death in *Reasons and Persons*, he refers to David Wiggins who posed a strange question: what would happen if the brain – *my* brain – were split into two halves, the left and the right hemisphere, and each of the two halves were inserted into a new body, i.e. my whole brain into two bodies: what, in this particular case, would happen to *me*? Formally, there are three options: (1) I wouldn’t survive, (2) I would survive as one of the two people, (3) I would survive as both people. Many would feel that this is merely a silly fantasy play – for how could a brain be split into two separate and still living and functioning halves? But the idea is not as preposterous as it might initially seem: Parfit, following Wiggins, believes that the splitting of the brain into two hemispheres is possible *in principle*, and mentions a famous neurosurgical example, where an epileptic patient is treated by surgically severing the connection between his two hemispheres (*corpus callosum*). Of course, this particular type of brain procedure could raise several possible and probably even well-founded ethical objections, but Parfit is not interested in ethical problems of brain surgery; he mentions the splitting and duplication of the brain merely as an example – the simplest possible example of *the bifurcation of the self*. The main point is that the two hemispheres can function relatively autonomously, a fact supported by certain other examples, e.g. consequences of brain damage, in which the undamaged hemisphere gradually takes over the functions of the damaged hemisphere. Of course, we could object to Parfit’s reasoning on methodological grounds stating that “thought experiments” in general and such *examples* in particular have a very limited epistemic value: they describe specific, imagination-bound situations that have very little to do with regular, normal human states. In general, this is true, but history of science teaches us that science made some of its most radical steps exactly when faced with extreme situations: experiential anomalies gave birth to the Theory of Relativity, Quantum Physics and other successful scientific theories that have spread from specific and borderline discoveries to a much broader and general domain.

Returning to Parfit’s main point based on the “example” of brain splitting: Parfit argues for the third possibility: I would survive as *both* persons – the survival of the bifurcated self is therefore possible! In his article *Personal Identity* he states:

The alternative [to the usual understanding of personal survival], for which I shall argue, is to give up the language of identity. We can suggest that I survive as two different people, without implying that I am these people (Parfit [2], p. 3)

Now, these sentences sound very peculiar, even incorrect, and from the grammatical point of view they actually *are* incorrect. But we wonder: how can I survive in both persons? The logic of identity teaches us that *I* cannot survive in both persons, as Parfit seems to suggest, since two persons would then be *one* and the *same* self. But Parfit maintains that I “survive as two separate people”, but at the same denies that I *am* “these two people”. However, faced with the usual alternative (*tertium non datur*), we cannot avoid asking the opposite question: so am I *neither* of the two? If I am neither, then how can *I* survive the hypothetical surgical procedure? There must be some kind of paradox in this – a paradox that contains an important, and a higher, deeper and more realistic conclusion: *the continuation of personal identity is not a necessary condition for my survival*. Parfit claims that personal identity isn’t necessary for the survival of a self – more accurately: *my selves* – and compares a self with a river branching into several streams that run parallel to one another: until reaching the delta, the branches move apart and then re-unite, forming islands, side channels, branched structures etc. The most surprising detail in this picture is the idea that it is not a unified person that survives but, *instead* of a person, a *branched self* in many of its, say, varieties, *my other selves*. Parfit claims that we only feel – as a result of our habitual way of thinking – that survival is the same as the perseverance of personal identity:

“Will I survive?” seems, I said, equivalent to “Will there be some person alive who is the same person as me?” (Parfit [2], p. 4)

But we keep asking ourselves: “In what other way can I survive as a person?” – Parfit, however, persuades us that in order for “our selves” to survive the perseverance of *personal* identity in time (neither in life nor after death) is *not* necessary. This statement is backed up with a pragmatic and, at the same time, axiological-ethical argument stating that with regard to the question of survival we should take into account *that which is truly important*. And what, in our desire for survival, is truly important? Let’s say we undergo the aforementioned Wiggins’ experiment of brain splitting in which my consciousness, my self, and even my person is split, bifurcated into two or more persons. Parfit feels that what is really important for survival is that

[t]he relation of the original person to each of the resulting people contains all that interests us – all that matters – in any ordinary case of survival. This is why we need a sense in which one person can survive as two. (Parfit [2], p. 5)

This seems akin to saying that parents survive in their children or ancestors in their descendants, and this is indeed very close to Parfit’s actual position, but with one important *proviso*: Parfit wants to generalize the notion of the survival of the self to include all persons, not only biological descendants, and not only people, but all beings with memory, consciousness and will – in other words, persons in the most general sense of the term. In the view of this new understanding of survival and a different approach to biological death, he sees the possibility of a renewal of humankind. This is why in the 13th chapter in *Reasons and Persons* entitled “What does matter” he states:

“There is still a difference between my life and the lives of other people. But the difference is less. Other people are closer. I am less concerned about the rest of my own life, and more concerned about the lives of others.” (Parfit [1], p. 281)

Parfit is trying to tell us that the question of survival is not an *all-or-nothing matter* – as we are accustomed to think – that what really matters is a “degree” or “quantity” of survival: the possibility of transferring as much of life contents of some transient person onto her followers: “What fundamentally matters are psychological connectedness and continuity” (Parfit [1], p. 313). One possible objection to such an understanding of survival would be that the birth and death of an individual human being, especially if this person is me or someone very close to me, are not a matter of degree but, rather, discrete jumps, sharp cuts, irrevocable thresholds between nothingness and being. Parfit would probably at least partly agree, but he would mostly want to deny our conviction of the irrevocability of death, i.e. he would try to transcend the idea that is so strongly rooted in the Western modern thought, namely that my death is my absolute end – and that basically I don’t need to care about what happens afterwards: *Après moi le deluge!* We might say that Parfit tries to overtake death of an individual person with the idea that the existence of every person is preserved in such a way that her thoughts, feelings, works and everything that person ever wanted to be in her life survive in her descendents – and that this is the only type of survival that *really matters*. Immortality is no longer understood as the persistence of one and the same individual person after death, because:

“There will later be some memories about my life. And there may later be thoughts that are influenced by mine, or things done as the result of my advice. My death will break the more direct relations between my present experiences, but it will not break various other relations. This is all there is to the fact that there will be no one living who will be me. Now that I have said this, my death seems to me less bad.” Parfit [1], p. 281)

In his own way, Parfit re-invented the Indian law of karma, the principle of persistence through chain of births and deaths. What strikes me as important here is the fact that Parfit came close to Eastern spirituality not on account of some “external” motive (as long as the desire for survival itself, albeit “bifurcated”, is not such a motive) but on account of his own metaphysical speculations. He emphasizes that the question of the survival of a self or selves is not related only to life after death, since births and deaths of selves – as pointed out before – occur already during a single lifetime. And maybe it is precisely when we are faced with perpetual “lifetime” of births and deaths of our selves that we sense the possibility for our perseverance after death? When Parfit speaks of many selves, he speaks of my “past and future selves”. There is no single self neither in life nor after death – a self is always a *multitude*, except perhaps (and this is my own addition) in the pure Cartesian “point” of *cogito*, cleansed of all empirical “shells”.

But if we speak of *my* past and future selves – *whose* are they, actually? Who is the carrier of *my* “other selves”? Yet another self? Parfit’s answer accords well with Buddhism and its notion of *anatta*: there is simply no universal subject, no “fundamental person”, no individual soul as a carrier of all selves. The idea of “my selves” is simply our standard way of speaking, *façon de parler*, that we find so hard to avoid. “Self”, strictly speaking, is an empty denominator. Parfit says:

If I say, “It will not be me, but one of my future selves,” I do not imply that I will be that future self. He is one of my later selves, and I am one of his earlier selves. There is no underlying person who we both are. (Parfit [2], p. 13)

It is true that Parfit's way of expressing this idea is a real "tongue twister". It is true that it is still *me* who speaks of *my* numerous *selves*. English speaking subjects can help themselves by differentiating between *I* (or *me*) and the plural form *selves* (for example, *other selves* etc.), but this particular word can be used in singular as well: *self* or *Self* (with upper or lower case). It is also true that it is hard to avoid any references to ego, even if we call it self and thus try to avoid direct self-referencing with the use of this philosophical term. However, these ruptures in language show (note that I didn't say express, but *show* – remember Wittgenstein) all that is essential, transcendent, "that of which we must speak over and over again"¹², but which cannot be reached with the speech itself, *logos*, but must be based and understood in spiritual *experience*, in different forms and types of meditation. Despite his rational and analytical diction, Parfit is fully aware of the experiential basis of philosophy, even if it is often neglected by some of his fellow philosophers and representatives of other academic disciplines.

A lot more interesting than examples where philosophical experience is either forgotten or simply ignored are examples where emphasis is put on the opposite experience, in this particular case on experience that the self (or *cogito* or ego) *evidently* exists. We won't be discussing great philosophies of *self* or subject here, from Descartes through Kant and Husserl to their modern followers – let me just briefly state (I wrote extensively on the subject elsewhere) that I am personally convinced of the self-evidence of *pure* transcendental self, i.e. that the thought "I am, I exist" evidently *is* true, although this obviousness is only "the top of a pyramid" disappearing in the dark – but will focus instead on one of modern writers on self or ego who is a direct critic of Derek Parfit: Richard Sorabji, a respected English philosopher, professor emeritus at King's College in London and famous expert on Aristotle, who published a voluminous book entitled *Self: Ancient and Modern Insights about Individuality, Life, and Death* (2006).

Sorabji believes the word "self" to be an individual-reflexive expression (literally "a token-reflexive expression"): "In asking about the self, I am not asking what it is to be a human being or a higher animal in general, but about what it is to be an individual one" (Sorabji, p. 20). The self is essentially personal, even more, the self actually *is* a person: there is no impersonal self, according to Sorabji, not only in the sense of Personalism of the 20th century, but also in the sense propounded by the whole Western modern philosophy of the self or subject that supposedly originated in Greece (Sorabji, primarily a classical philologist, supports this claim with numerous examples from the Ancient Greek philosophy). And now comes the crucial part: "By a 'person' I mean someone who *has* psychological states and *does* things, by a 'thinker' someone who *has* thoughts. This having and doing can be summed up by saying that a person *owns* psychological states and actions." (*ibid.*, p. 21) The key category in Sorabji's explication of the relationship between the self and the person and his or her mental states is *ownership, possession*. What is more, Sorabji feels that the notion "stream of consciousness" – Buddhists would say "sequence of phenomena" – is empty and meaningless if there is no "owner" of this stream or sequence of mental states. This position puts him in opposition with Parfit, whose ideas he criticizes in several short passages as well as in the whole 15th chapter entitled "Why I am not a stream of consciousness?"¹³ Sorabji's critique of

¹² See: M. Uršič, *Enivetok* (1981), first sentence.

¹³ It is possible that this title is a direct paraphrase of the famous lecture by Bertrand Russell *Why I am not a Christian* (1927). Sorabji's philosophy of individual self and/or person puts him much closer to Christianity than to Eastern religions, although he never explicitly opts for Christianity in *The Self*. Of special interest is also a sentence he wrote with regards to Thomas Aquinas' critique of Averroes' interpretation of Aristotle (Averroes claimed that we find eternal mind or spirit in Aristotle, and not an individual soul): "The Christian resurrection

Parfit's views is very sophisticated and academic, and he acknowledges that Parfit is an important philosophical adversary; but at the same time he fiercely rejects his "reductionism", claiming that, because of the reduction of the self, Parfit is unable to answer two key questions: 1. "How to link a single stream without appeal to an owner" (*ibid.*, p. 269-71) and 2. "How to distinguish different streams without appeal to different owners?". (*ibid.*, p. 271-72) Parfit, as well as Buddhism, could answer these two questions by saying that a sufficient, if not necessary, condition for the "internal" connectedness of different streams of consciousness and for the "external" distinction between them is a simple fact that these streams, at least during a single lifetime, are physically "connected" to (1) *the same* and (2) *different* brains – but, a word of caution: this is hardly a sufficient argument for materialism, let alone for a reduction of mental states to neural states (i.e. for the claim that "the stream of consciousness" is merely some sort of "an epiphenomenon"), because several other options are open for the explanation of the mind-body problem: emergence, supervenience, and after all, the emanation of body from spirit – why not?

There is a blatant misunderstanding at the very core of Sorabji's critique of Parfit, maybe firstly of a terminological kind. In his book *Reasons and Persons*, Parfit uses the word "self" primarily in its plural form (except in certain compound words, such as "self-interest" etc.); if the word is used in singular, Parfit denies it "in a Buddhist fashion" (for example, in the phrase "liberation from the self") – but this doesn't mean that Parfit is a strict (*Theravada*) Buddhist who also denies "the Self" (with a capital letter), since he doesn't speak of "self" in "trans-personal terms", but simply uses plural forms in his discussions of the bifurcation of self: "other selves", "successive selves" etc. By this he means individual *persons* whose identity is not preserved in cosmic time; in other words, there is no "fundamental person" of all "selves". – Sorabji, on the other hand, uses the term "self" to refer primarily to a *person* in a Personalist sense, i.e. as a *personality*, and that is why his criticism of Parfit "misses the target": he accuses him of not seeing the existence of a self as a person, but for Parfit the existence of a person as a (psychological, social, ethical etc.) *personality* is not in question, because in a functional, this-worldly, "ontic" sense a person/personality really *does* exist. Parfit's real question is whether a person can retain her identity, her personality even *after* her bodily death. His answer to this question is, of course, negative, but he gives an affirmative answer to some other (and paradoxically, the same) question: does a self survive bodily death? Yes, but only as a "bifurcated self": i.e. as a disperse, yet simultaneously all-encompassing Self. It seems Sorabji fails to notice this distinction in Parfit, and what I find especially intriguing is the fact that this seemingly insignificant, yet important misunderstanding, triggered the production of this voluminous and highly interesting book called *The Self*. As a reader, I had the feeling that Sorabji started writing his book on ego/self primarily to criticize Parfit and similar thinkers who deny the existence of a *personal* self, whose existence Sorabji defends with all his intellectual powers, but in doing so, he fails to notice that Parfit doesn't really deny the existence of an impersonal self, i.e. a "universal" Self, but actually implicitly *presupposes* it. Because, although inspired by the Buddhist notion of *anatta*, he is much closer to *Mahayana* than to *Hinayana* (*Theravada*) Buddhism, and in *Mahayana* the ethical compassion of "awakened beings" (*Bodhisattvas*) towards all other beings actually presupposes a universal Self, namely the "connectedness" of "selves" – for what else could be the basis of the ancient and at the same time modern cosmic ethos?

We can also approach the realization that we cannot "own" (in Sorabji's emphatic sense) any of "our" mental contents or processes with the help of a phenomenological

matters because each of us asks 'what about *my* survival?'. (Sorabji, p. 48) Is there any question that is further removed from Buddhism, but also from genuine Christian compassion?

analysis of personal memories. Parfit, in his writings on “other selves”, expresses an interesting idea that it “might be possible to think of experiences in a wholly ‘impersonal’ way” (Parfit [2], p. 8). This idea becomes especially strange if we apply it to personal memories, i.e. memories that we ourselves personally experienced in the past and were then stored in our memory, for example, my discussion with a certain person, say Mary, half an hour ago: this raises an interesting question whether my memory of this particular event can be transmitted *as a memory* into a consciousness of someone who hasn’t had a discussion with Mary today at all? Generally speaking, are there “impersonal” memories? It would seem that such a transfer is impossible, since a certain experience, for example my discussion with Mary, would, if it were transferred to someone else (say, John), cease to be a *memory* experience. Memory always evokes past personal experiences – how could it evoke an experience of someone else? (I’m not talking about “historical memory” etc., but rather about “personal memory”). We can conjure up the experiences of others in our minds, imagine them, but we cannot remember them. Or can we?

It is of course true that we normally remember our personal experiences, but Parfit doesn’t exclude the possibility that we could also remember experiences of *other* selves; he introduces the term “quasi-memories” or “q-memories” for this possibility: for example, I “quasi-remember” a certain past experience that was experienced by *someone* (one of my other selves) and I feel this memory to be connected with *my* personal experience. This can raise the following question: how can I know that something was experienced by someone else and that this particular experience is actually related to my own experience? It is hard to find a suitable answer to this question – hard, but perhaps not impossible. The idea that we could have quasi-memories emerges from the realization that already during a single lifetime – from birth to death – a multitude of selves is born and dies within us: the power of memory connects them, although, of course, it is imperfect and often misleading: despite the fact that I have been reborn several times throughout my lifetime (as the mythical bird Phoenix), and that my aging body is populated by new and new selves, I remember at least some of the experiences from my childhood – experiences of my long-gone self, i.e. of some other self that is now almost completely foreign to me. Eventually, more and more memories are accumulated in this way. Parfit then wonders why would it be impossible for me to remember the experiences of my other selves – those selves who lived before my biological birth? That would be something akin to Buddha’s “first vigil”, when, in his spirit, he reviewed all his past lives...but it has already been said that this type of Buddhist recollection should be understood in the appropriate context and with a grain of salt, but definitely not literally.

But Parfit also provides support for his belief in the existence of “quasi-memories” on a purely phenomenological basis – namely, he claims that your memory of a certain experience doesn’t necessarily also contain a memory experience that it was *you* who experienced it. And if we think closely, if we inspect our memories through the prism of phenomenological *epoché*, and clean them of all theoretical “prejudices”, so that all that remains is their direct conscious givenness, we realize that Parfit is probably right: it is true that our memories of past experiences usually don’t contain the evidence of *ourselves* as the subjects of our past experiences. I can remember Mary’s scarf, but don’t necessarily recall myself watching her scarf and storing it in my memory – unless I specifically remembered a certain attitude toward that particular impression, for example joy or surprise upon seeing her new scarf. In reflexive thought, all that I can really know with certainty, is that I exist (am) *now*, even, of course, when I’m actually *remembering* my past.

It is true, however, that the mere *possibility* of the existence of quasi-memories doesn’t mean they actually exist. In his thorough discussions on memory, Edmund Husserl, the founder of phenomenology, didn’t pay attention to the possibility of the existence of quasi-

memories, although he did speak – for example, when discussing imagination – of “quasi-reality”. But Husserl’s starting point differed significantly from that of Parfit’s: for Husserl, the very fact that I have memories *presupposes* the identity of a transcendental self, i.e. of my own self who has memories and, in the flow of time, remains the very same self, but also the same person, when in self- reflection I strip, by means of “eidetic reduction”, everything from me that is merely empirical and contingent. If, however, I choose to follow Parfit and thus deny the fact that the identity of a person is a necessary condition for the perseverance and survival of my bifurcated self, then a possibility of quasi-memories suddenly opens up, i.e. memories of experiences of my other selves, maybe even other, already deceased persons. And this is no esotericism, or even spiritism, but merely intersubjective openness of memory.

Despite this theoretical possibility, I still wonder and try to come up with an honest answer to the following question: can *I personally* believe that, in addition to my own memories, I also possess memories of others, especially in the so-called *déjà vu* experiences? In my opinion, this “irrational” hunch also presents a limit to a rationally acceptable philosophical theory (and this holds true for Parfit’s theory as well) – so far an unknown limit. However, I can say that I’m much in tune with Parfit’s belief according to which transcending death doesn’t necessarily imply identity of an individual person, but that what truly matters is the perseverance of deeds carried out in one’s lifetime and passed on to one’s progeny, which by no means refers only to great heroic, artistic or scientific works, but rather to all thoughts, feelings, memories, wishes and all contents of consciousness in which probably also one’s bodily shape, facial expressions, eye colour etc. are also written down, and maybe all that is truly worth of preserving in eternity of a given human or any other being. My personal worldview is much more similar to the stated belief than to the Christian belief in the individual immortal soul which presupposes, from a philosophical perspective, the perseverance of identity of an individual person.

In the end, we can try to connect different threads of this essay – near-death experiences, Buddhist transmigration and survival of “my many selves” – with the following thought: *Everything that is happening to me, is also happening to you; and everything that is happening to you, is also happening to me.* This should be the highest goal of cosmic consciousness, the ethical basis of solidarity, cooperation, compassion. It is hard to reach this goal in its entirety, but we can put it into practice on every step, in every moment, here-and-now.

(Translated by Sebastjan Vörös)

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(#still to be completed#)

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