

Living With Limits: The Continuum of Consciousness

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to explore the possibility of unifying principles between certain eastern philosophies on the nature of consciousness at death (which could be considered mysticism) with certain Western quantum concepts of cognitive patterns (which are customarily considered neuroscience). The intention is to outline the startling similarities and compatibilities between these two modes of thought by examining the proposed idea of *embodied meaning*, the concept that our use of symbolic forms encodes cultural artifacts with common patterns that convey something of the continuity of consciousness beyond arbitrary borders. Indeed, our physical entities themselves might also be considered material artifacts (embodied meanings), which reflect obvious energy patterns based on codes common to objects, thoughts, memories, dreams and to all philosophical concepts. I further approach the potential for certain Tibetan Buddhist principles, such as the *Bardo Thodol* teachings, to be practical examples of an early non-scientific (but not non-empirical) precursor to contemporary neuroscience, especially to current notions of neuroplasticity. The salient idea conveyed in the paper is that a unifying pattern exists that suggests a proportional harmony between physical matter and psychic matter, and that the identical ratio can be used to try to come to terms with the end of life experience as both a departure and a return. (See Figure 1 at the end.)

I

“Just as psychoanalysis reconstructs the original traumatic situation in order to release the repressed material, so we are now being plunged back into the archaeopsychic past, uncovering the ancient taboos and drives that have been dormant for epochs... Each one of us is as old as the entire biological kingdom, and our bloodstreams are tributaries of the great sea of its total memory.”

(J. G. Ballard, *The Drowned World*, 1962, p. 41)

As a writer and culture critic my role is to explicate both works of art and the cultures which create them, not from the usual judgmental point of view that assesses success or failure from the relative angle of aesthetics but

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from the phenomenological vantage point of encountering those works of art as what they actually are: *embodied meanings*. I often interpret whole cultures, and even whole civilizations, as if they were individual works of art, because that is precisely what they are. Such a comparative approach allows us to utterly preclude issues such as liking or disliking the relative features of works in any medium, or using our limited time and energy to declare the success or failure of their maker's intentions. Works of art, whether they are visual, architectural, literary, musical, or durational, are all dark mirrors of the *consciousness* that created them. Like us, they succeed because they exist. Also, as per the work of Ernst Cassirer, all symbolic forms, including our own, are a reflection of limits and patterns.

We are therefore free to more fully experience the degree to which drastically different kinds of art objects, of embodied meanings, are really the immediate sense data reflections of the consciousness of the particular cultural context within which they were created. As such, none are superior or inferior in kind, apart from the accumulated aesthetic, psychic and spiritual assumptions of their culture. It suddenly becomes possible to understand the deeper strata levels at which a classically representational Vermeer painting is totally equivalent to an apparently randomly abstract Pollock painting, as well as the degree to which both utterly succeed in conveying the key elements of the space (and the time) in which they were produced. They are emblems of an enigma: their maker's consciousness.

As Cassirer's exemplary research indicated, the symbolic forms we utilize are multiple: that of language, which both the writer and reader are using now in a quantum-like manner of transmission and reception which utterly eliminates our separate locations; as well as of mathematics, the principal language with which the universe makes itself accessible to and discernible by us. One reciprocal and reconciling pattern ratio also governs everything in existence, both physical and immaterial.

This is accomplished via a bio-mimicry motif that perpetually echoes the proportional harmonies in nature *and* culture that replicate the spiral growth pattern of the Fibonacci sequence and its ratio. In addition, we have at our disposal the symbolic forms of music, design, mythology, religion, philosophy and psychology, each of which is a distinct form-language with specific aims and accomplishments, i.e., Chartres Cathedral, Einstein's relativity equation, Mozart's concertos, Shakespeare, or the archetypal depth principles found in both Carl Jung, Mircea Eliade, and Tibetan Buddhism.

As we will see, and as readers looking for more detail than can be offered in this short paper can easily find with available research, the last

great works of art, at the embodied meaning level, are also philosophical propositions or even spiritual statements on par with the Pre-Socratics.

I am not by profession an academic, and as a cultural journalist I am if anything more of a professional voyeur, but since I take a scholarly approach to all art objects, whether they are prehistoric stone carvings or Andy Warhol silkscreens, I am perhaps advantageously positioned to speculate on some of the questions posed by this thematic journal issue from a somewhat unique perspective. As an art critic, and one who also writes about photography and especially films as an integral part (maybe even the culmination) of the history of art and visual culture, I have observed a couple of key distinctions between the supposedly nebulous realm of aesthetics and the supposedly concrete realm of science. Science, and especially the zones devoted to neurological speculations, appears to be devoted to reducing and eventually eliminating the unknown, to replacing the unknown with the known. Fair enough, up to a point.

Art on the other hand, appears to be devoted to increasing the amount of unknown in our world, expanding the unknown until there is perhaps nothing *but* the unknown, which would of course be synonymous with a state akin to perpetual wonderment, rapture, bliss or otherwise magical states of contentment and awe. It stands to reason (no pun intended) that all the ideas we might exchange in the service of the questions asked by this journal in general and this issue in particular are speculative in nature. As far as I know, no dead people are submitting papers reporting on their experiences of the transitional state between the embodied existential condition and the disembodied post-conscious state. If they have, I for one look forward to reading their deceased accounts, and as far as I know Houdini has yet to make good on his dying promise to communicate with us from the other side, if he found it possible to do so.

Of course he may also be communicating with us daily but we are unable to translate his transmissions. This observation is only partly tongue in cheek, since clearly there will be no right or wrong avenues of speculation when it comes to the ultimate fate of consciousness. Just as clearly, all fervent disputes or aggressively constructed arguments on the subject, no matter how cogently or rationally arrayed, will be utterly fruitless in the end, since we will all only personally experience this transition once (though Ludwig Wittgenstein once observed that we can never experience our own

death). So did Maurice Blanchot: “Death is the absolute future in which the absolute past approaches, but only approaches, for death is never present.”²

Therefore, it also stands to reason, by a logic perhaps even more powerful than reason itself, that the sooner we contemplate the cessation of our own consciousness, by whatever means seems most efficient and effective, the better prepared we will be to meet this abrupt mortal departure (which, we should remember, can occur anytime at all, even before the end of this very sentence) with something resembling equanimity, elegance, poise and the absence of fear. I don’t know about you, but from my perspective those four descriptors are the key elements I would want to possess when I begin to experience the dissolution of all other ingredients making up the embodied realm around me. In other words, when “I” attempt to experience the impossible absence of “me.”

Surely thinking about these two ingredients in advance via some kind of contemplation would be useful, by whatever means necessary, and in my particular case that includes some degree of Buddhist hermeneutics. Perhaps this is because such speculation is the primary and principal impetus of the Buddhist psychology examining the nature of consciousness, its potential meanings, implications and consequences. In other words, the most important factor in approaching questions about the nature of consciousness must also include outcomes that influence our behaviours and interactions with the other sentient beings around us, or else what is the point of such speculation in the first place?

For example, if we were able to accomplish a phenomenal feat of elegant and exhaustive deductive reasoning expressed in beautiful abstract terms such as Heidegger’s, and yet we remained capable of such dense feats of denial and delusion as expressed in his *Black Book* entries, what had really been accomplished in the end (literally)? I mean, really, was his potentially final thought as a human being on the planet earth, *oh what a clever boy am I?* If so, what did he actually accomplish, apart from existential entertainment of a vaudevillian sort? Was the gorgeous trajectory of his thinking about thinking really just greasepaint, makeup on the human mask?

So, obviously the question we’re all considering here is what happens when the human mask is removed? What if anything is underneath? And perhaps even more importantly, what difference does it make, apart from occupying our preciously short time on earth to the fullest extent? Therefore

² Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, A. Smock, trans. University of Nebraska Press, 1982, p. 117. Original in French, 1955.

my first speculative answer, as an agent of affect who accepts and even embraces the unknown, uncertainty, obscurity and ambiguity, without feeling the need to replace them with their binary opposites, is *Yes*. Does consciousness end, yes. Does consciousness continue, yes. Does consciousness awaken, yes. Does consciousness transform, yes. How could it be otherwise?

It, consciousness, does all these things – and who can say otherwise, apart from poor Houdini, whose messages remain as mute as the ending of a Beckett play (another embodied meaning by the way, and one which might address the nature of self-consciousness at least as adequately as Kant did). When the brain and the body die, not being separate entities, the entire world dies, not in the manner that solipsists might entertain (as delightful and unassailable as their position is) but to the degree that our largely illusory experience of having an inherent, separate and independent *self* or *soul* is really what dies.

This is where the Buddhist psychology (preferable to the identifier “religion” since there is no deity to speak of in its tenets) comes into play for us. This is where the potential for a concept of consciousness being a continuum that has always been here, a consciousness platform which in fact manufactures the apparently solid world around us as a stage for our performance, enters the picture. What if the entity we identify as a *self* never existed in the first place but was merely a projection on our experience of the sensory world as a collection of disconnected and disparate elements within which we are trapped and isolated? What if “it” doesn’t die so much as cease to have a format for application?

What if its existential job description is redundant? It drops away and reveals to us what we were too disconnected to see before, a sudden expanse in every direction of the luminosity of mind, not *our* mind per se, but the theatrical playground of the senses within which our mask was being worn? What if this sudden unmasking reveals us to be a succession of life forms parading across a stage, each one wearing a different mask (table, robin, shark, cloud, stone, water, cat, etc.) but each one being identically the same thing?

One of the greatest psychologists and philosophers who asked pertinent questions about the nature of our consciousness, and especially of our identity, was the author Franz Kafka, who disguised his interrogative insights in the form of his fiction and even more powerfully in his personal diaries. His embodied meanings are riddled with riddles and parables that are easy for the distracted reader to misinterpret as depressing, gloomy,

doomed or death-obsessed, but they are actually far from it. One of his finest observations was hidden like a glistening little gem in the middle of his endless and exhaustive process of journal entry writing. It alone, if interpreted accurately, presents a clear indication of the depth of this man's thought processes regarding the nature of consciousness.

"The meaning of life is that it stops," Kafka remarks.³ But this doesn't mean, as many wrongly supposed, that he felt life was pointless, irrelevant, or fated to conclude with failure (even though often enough elsewhere he was all too consumed with his own perceived personal flaws and failures). If we interpret this entry correctly it simply states something as clearly as Wittgenstein himself may have put it. Life is temporary; its chief and primal characteristic is that of impermanence. How do we intend to spend our limited time? The corollary of such an insight is even more instructive and moves us to the most obvious extension of this basic existential observation: if that is the meaning of life, its temporary condition, then what is the purpose if it?

The purpose of it, Kafka is suggesting by inference, is to make impermanence meaningful, as in existentialism. Precisely how we do that, of course, returns us to the relativity of any truth whatsoever: what is meaningful is defined by the parameters, by the limits, of each individual culture and each individual occupant of that culture. This naturally suggests that all forms of meaning, just as with all forms of the embodiment known as artworks, are equivalent, correct, proper, true, accurate, and deserving of our tolerance. The only thing that prevents us from accepting the sometimes drastically different forms of meaning around us is the myth of otherness, the unceasing devotion to the belief that each of our "selves" is the real world and that our perspective is the right one.

It is clearly the case that, after sufficient examination, it is only our aggressively slavish perspective on this illusory condition of otherness that ever really *dies*. Reports have come down to us over the ages however, not created by psychics, mystics, séances, or believers in the *other side* but rather by practitioners of the science of contemplation who penetrated to what we might as well refer to as the quantum level of consciousness and have garnered a clear picture of its continuum. They have even managed to maintain enough cognizance of their/our condition to suggest an even more spacious continuum, one extending from one life to another in a long sequence of consciousness-events fueled by a consistent source of energy,

³ Gustav Janouch (1971). *Conversations with Kafka*. New Directions, p. 120.

one which does not differentiate between our being a dolphin, a bee, a cactus or a Billie Holiday.

II

“The phenomenon to explain is why the brain, as a machine, insists that it has this property that is non-physical.”

(Michael Graziano, Neuroscientist, Princeton University, speaking to a symposium at the New York Academy of Sciences, May, 2016)

Given that all possibilities are equally plausible, even the most outlandish ones, and that all our speculations cannot be proven or disproven, I for one see no particular reason to discount the intriguing line of reasoning developed back in 1976 by Julian Jaynes in his remarkable book *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*. This of course involved his supposition that until a relatively recent occurrence some five thousand years ago, the domination of the brain by the right hemisphere rendered us technically unconscious until the unification of those spheres eliminated the apparent existence of voices outside our heads and instead situated the *one voice* in the centre a functioning self-conscious entity.

The only thing he didn't do that he could have done, since he resolved that evolution only goes forward in one direction, was to postulate that upon death the unified spheres forming our current format of consciousness return to a bicameral state, leaving its central command position drifting to the periphery and eventually dissolving altogether. Thus the only remaining speculation, given such a possible scenario, would be to try to quantify or at least interpret the sequence of hallucinatory experiences encountered by the dying individual as he or she traverses this potential reverse evolution and returns first to a bicameral format (exactly duplicating the binary polarities in nature that cause the spiral growth pattern of the golden ratio and Fibonacci sequence in the first place) and finally plunges into a *no-cameral* mind, seemingly no matter what a particular self has experienced.

This would be a mind that is undifferentiated from all the matter and mind surrounding it, existing, even temporarily, in a panpsychic (for lack of a better word) realm. I don't believe we should discount Jaynes's notion just because either it was formulated way back in the late 1970s, or just because it was delivered in a vastly popular mainstream book instead of in an academic journal. Another reason for reconsidering it is the subsequent

research on binary design codes conducted by Gyorgy Doczi in another popular non-academic book, *The Power of Limits: Proportional Harmonies in Nature, Art and Architecture*, in which the author explored the dizzying array of ways in which the reciprocal interaction of opposite forces creates recursive patterns from galaxies to seashells, crystals and DNA helices.

My point is that the same observation can be made about the dual sphere design of the brain and the cognitive patterns which result from the interaction of these two *sides* to produce a self-reflexive awareness sophisticated enough to paint Sistine Chapels and write Tolstoy novels, as well as being intimate enough to wonder what is happening in the last moments of its own existence.

One saving grace of entertaining this and any other theory is that it also doesn't preclude the possibility for existential amusement while we are doing so, and that even humour or comedy itself (a superb form of cognitive dissonance when practiced at the level of an Aristophanes) can also be a valid form of philosophical enquiry. Thus I found it seriously amusing recently to observe the permutations of an article by the science writer of the *New York Times*, George Johnson, reporting on his attendance at a recent conference in Tucson now called *The Science of Consciousness*.

The May 16th article was called *A Carnival of the Mind*, the July 4th iteration was called *Messing with the Mind*, and the July 5th reprint was titled *The Brain Versus the Mind*, each one titled by a different editor from his or her own vantage point and each one suggesting a slightly different nuance on the same event. This struck me as having some salient similarities to what all of us do, not only when entertaining different theories of the same phenomenon but even on a daily basis when we reiterate our own memories of either our childhood or just the day before this one.

The Tucson conference in question took place in April of this year, and Johnson was reporting on the bewildering array of conflicting or at least competing panels, sessions and papers being delivered simultaneously, more than anyone could hope to attend unless they cloned their brain in order to do so. He referenced one room where scientists and philosophers were discussing the physiology of brain cells and how they might generate the thinking mind; in another the subject was free will, whether such a generated consciousness could actually have it or was just manifesting a delusion; another session was examining panpsychism, the exotic but plausible idea that everything, whether animal, vegetable or mineral is based at the sub-atomic level on mindlike features; and competing with these sessions were

others on phenomenal consciousness, the extended mind, and the neural correlates of consciousness.

All were exploring where consciousness came from, few if any were examining where consciousness goes to, if anywhere, or more importantly to me, *anywhen* – the time of consciousness. Johnson pointed out that the human mind has plumbed the universe, determining that it is almost 14 billion years old, and the same mind has discovered, with the aid of super-particle colliders, that invisible dark particles such as the Higgs-Boson are actually gluing all of reality together in a kind of supreme void which is indistinguishable from the so-called solid contents it supports.

But as he observed, there is no scientific explanation for consciousness itself, without which none of these discoveries about consciousness could have been made. Further, what occurs at the moment of its extinction is even more disregarded, perhaps because science has always abandoned such notions as metaphysical and thus more the domain of religion, a strange distinction to someone like me (and also for Werner Heisenberg) for whom science and religion are two sides of the same coin, or should we say sides of the same brain.

Johnson reported that, for one attendee, Michael Graziano, a neuroscientist at Princeton,

Consciousness is a kind of con-game the brain plays with itself. The brain is a computer that evolved to simulate the outside world. Among its internal models is a simulation of itself—a crude approximation of its own neurological processes. The result is an illusion. Instead of neurons and synapses, we sense a ghostly presence—a self inside the head. But it’s all just data processing. The machine mistakenly thinks it has magic inside it, and it calls the magic consciousness. (“The Mind Messing With the Mind”, *New York Times – Science*, July 4, 2016)

Of course, his *processing* can’t quite ever explain how such a machine can produce James Joyce’s novels, Picasso’s paintings, or Duke Ellington’s music.

But this Doczi sensibility of extending the pattern making processes in nature’s matter all the way into the design motifs of human art and culture can actually do so. Equally possible is the way in which the “self that isn’t there” can be explored and explained by certain Tibetan Buddhist yogis who compiled the assembled texts devoted to the experience of death and dying (and for that matter of rebirth) known as *The Book of Liberation Through Understanding in the Between* (i.e., *Bardo Thodol*). This is the book more

popular known in the west as the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, as a result of the misguided translations commissioned by the well-intentioned European Evans-Wentz.

This remarkable book of contemplation is said to have semi-legendary origins that incorporate multiple mythologies and merge them with actualized practices. Its origins in both legend and mythology in no way devalue its deep input into questions of mortality and the fate of consciousness, since mythology – as Cassirer, Jung, Eliade, and others such as James Hillman, Henri Corbin and the popular Joseph Campbell have indicated – also contains a profound set of shared human projections, the archetypes of the collective unconscious, which recur regularly through every distinctly different culture and somehow unify them at the foundational level of being.

This contemplative book, passages of which are actually read aloud to the dying person, before, during and after the death experience in order to orient them to the astonishing self-generated visions they are thought to be experiencing, some of them terrifying in nature. These visions arise in the mindstream of the dying person as he or she is coming into contact with the so-called clear light nature of mind or the white light vision reported by so many westerners, a phenomenon which is not actually separate from the mind of the individual dying person and which never was separate from it.

Tradition (which includes both legend and mythology remember) states that this text was composed in about the 8th Century CE by the yogi master Padma Sambhava and hidden by him for a later era to find, when it was “unearthed as terma” by a renowned treasure-finder Karma Lingpa in the 14th century.⁴ Before discounting the supposedly superstitious aspects of these practices, designed to remove fear and liberate the dying, we would do well to remember that during these same historic periods in the West, we were still engaged in barbaric heresy wars, brutal crusades, insanely self-torturing inquisitions and human burnings in an imaginary war against an evil invented by our monotheistic and anthropomorphic deity projections. By comparison to our own pathological history, this particular science of the spiritual passage out of one life and into another is quite gentle, kind, compassionate and visionary.

These meditative practices, which can also be engaged in on a nightly basis by us when we fall asleep, dream and wake up again, are also part of a larger corpus called *The Profound Teaching of the Natural Liberation through Contemplating the Mild and Fierce Deities* (Norbu). Such “deities”

⁴ Namkhai Norbu, *Self Liberation*. Station Hill Press, 1989, p. xii.

by the way are not thought to be real but are more the internal projections of our mind as it comes to terms with the experience of extinction, and also as it reflects the basic binary polarities inherent in the embodied condition. It involves realizing that everything we are experiencing (whether it is meeting the Virgin Mary, talking with Moses, or dancing with Rita Hayworth) is actually happening only in our mind(s).

Removing the fear of hallucinations, which of course we also experience on a daily and nightly basis, is actually the base for liberation from all our sufferings, whether real or imagined. I mention this system of thought also as a means of potentially situating the binary vision of Julian Jaynes in both a transpersonal and a trans-cultural context. This makes sense to me, not least because as we are dying surely we cease to be as distinctly separate as entities as we usually believe we are, and also simply because the existence of a collective unconscious foundation allows us all to perpetually experience the same archetypal human dream images regardless of our culture. It also suggests a valuable outcome to the nightly practice of watching our minds dissolve into dreams before our eyes in the charmingly titled rehearsal practice known as *dream yoga*.

Of course all of this speculative reasoning and contemplative practice only works to our advantage if we are able to be brave enough to accept the fact that life is temporary and existence is impermanent, that we might die at any moment, and that it makes sense to be prepared. This is rather difficult for those of us in the West whose whole daily existence is predicated upon the fear of death, the presence of evil, sin and punishment in an afterlife whose very parameters we never even imagine, apart from believing that we'll be rewarded for being *good* and by following the correct superstitions and instructions.

By the way, I'm in no way denigrating the religions of the West, since I was raised a Catholic before stumbling into Buddhism, only observing that they in no practical way prepare us to actually encounter and experience the death of our consciousness, whatever that might be. Also, I'm pretty secure in my belief that in the transitional stages between the end of one life and the beginning of another, I'll most likely be dancing with Rita Hayworth. Of that much I can be as reasonably certain as it is possible to be of a hologram. One can always dream.

There is of course, no east or west in dreams. That is where we can most readily research, anticipate and prepare for the alarming cessation of consciousness as it occurs right in front of our eyes, and perhaps also to maintain enough stability to establish continuity. The continuum of

consciousness is not however the same as some hoped for afterlife for the soul, since the soul is largely as illusory as the self was by that stage. On the contrary, the continuum might suggest the potential for an awareness of the transition from one to the next, not to the afterlife, but the next life. Or, if the Bardo texts are accurate in some fashion, for the possibility of not having a next life with all its attendant difficulties, unless, it suggests, one is a being such as the Dalai Lama, who, as a bodhisattva or fully enlightened creature, appears to return intentionally in order to lessen the sufferings of other sentient beings. Few of us however are ever vouchsafed that particular privilege, since obviously we are primarily preoccupied with our own lot in this life, or the next one, or the one after that.

One of the best ways to engage with and utilize the energy of the dream state is to become lucid in the midst of a dream and apply the insights practically. This does differ significantly from the western New Age concept of lucid dreaming, however, which usually results only in being able to manufacture an endless series of encounters which don't further the core motivation (i.e., wasting our time with silly notions such as dancing with Rita Hayworth for instance).

The more appropriate approach is to gain a familiarity with the luminous nature of mind during mind-fabricated image scenarios which can then be useful during the death experience, according to these traditions, and enable the *traveller* to realize the ground-nature they always possessed but were too distracted by the ghost-self to notice before. It is naturally therefore most advantageous to apply such insights into the everyday nature of *waking consciousness* in order to vitally witness the truly dreamlike aspects of our daily experiences. In other words, to realize that we are essentially dreaming at all times, constantly, without this exotic fact actually meaning that life is not real. Incredibly, it *is* being dreamed, and yet it *is* definitely real.⁵

Familiarity with this fact of life, it is said, can allow us not only to be comfortable during the dying process, but also benefit us in dealing with other sentient beings we encounter during our lives, especially the ones who may cause us some degree of difficulty. I myself have had some intriguing experiences using dream yoga and bardo contemplation, starting from an early age when it began to manifest itself spontaneously without my intentional seeking, a phenomenon which prompted me to come into contact with a degree of awareness continuity and a continuum of consciousness that

⁵ Waking brain states cannot be distinguished from dreaming brain states, so, from the brain's perspective, we are dreaming all the time, according to Rodolfo Llinás (*I of the Vortex: From Neurons to Self*. MIT Press, 2001).

enabled me to (somehow) come into direct contact with information, data, knowledge or experiential content that could only have come from another, presumably earlier, lifetime. In other words, *terma* treasures.

But that however, is another story, and another paper. For now, suffice it to say that this particular speculation, or theory of consciousness of the death experience, posits that you cannot lose something (an inherent self) that never actually existed in the first place, other than as a reflexive *voice* and its concomitant emotional apparatus hovering in your head. It can however permit us to gain a new appreciation for the magical nature of awareness, the amazing capacity to produce symbolic forms, and the manner in which the foundational base energy can shift into and out of focus as we are born, live, dream, and die, over and over and over again. Perhaps most rewarding in this approach is the fact that this ongoing evolutionary process has no specific aim: it is not about evolving *toward* some fully perfected or angelic state. We are all already in this perfect state, all the time. We're just too dumb to realize it. That's where the assistance of a *reality sherpa* comes in handy.

III

“What is this? Regarding these present phenomena, I have died and am wandering in the transitional process; so this place, these companions and these indistinct appearances are phenomena of the transitional process of becoming. Previously I did not recognize that process, and I wandered on. Now I shall arise as the embodiment of it.”

(*Experiential Instructions on the Six Bardos*, trans. Alan Wallace. Wisdom Publications, 1998, p. 257)

Naturally enough, everything in which we are engaged is not only pure speculation but also raw wondering. As a practitioner of Dzogchen and Bardo Dream Yoga for many years, its emphasis on preparing carefully for the moment of extinction or transition strikes me as very sound advice. By no means an expert, I was fortunate enough to experience bardo states and insights during personal encounters with the *terma* teachings of Padmasambhava (which are preferable investigations to the Evans-Wentz mistranslations known as the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*). His practice of the six bardos, as well as those of Naropa, which draw parallels between waking, sleeping, dreaming and dying, allow the practitioner (any practitioner, regardless of intellectual capacity or background) to recognize the base-nature of mind – which in Dzogchen is also known as The Great

Perfection – and to become familiar with the transitions in and out of the waking and sleeping states and the living, dying and post-death states (bardos) with considerable continuity.

One thing that is certain, and which has been clarified by many investigators such as Kübler-Ross (*On Death and Dying*, 1977) and others, is that only the dying can teach us about death, if we are brave enough to watch and listen. In the Tibetan Buddhist bardo traditions there are specialists whose entire existential enterprise is based upon not only this kind of bearing witness, but also to guiding the dying being through a threshold that can obviously be disconcerting to the unprepared.

The profound Dzogchen methods practiced by Chogyal Norbu also provide ample thought provoking speculation based on the actualized practice of awareness continuity before, during and after death. The key to this is not the *post-mortem* experience, but the preparation in sentient realms we occupy on a daily basis. This ground awareness is accessible to everyone here and now, since that is the ground of being which *emerges*, or appears to emerge, during dreaming or dying but which is also present as the base from which the entire phenomenal world appears in the mirror-like radiance with which we're all familiar. So I would suggest that consciousness doesn't *do* anything during death; it also doesn't quite transform either, it merely continues doing what it always does, which is to be misconstrued as a solid world of separate entities all competing for space and time locales.

The ground nature of mind, however, does seem to be *uncovered*, which is why so many parallel experiences are reported at an archetypal level by diverse peoples with utterly divergent belief systems, which are then projected into or upon whatever cultural context they occupy. One thing they all share, or so it seems to me, is the sudden realization that their entire life and experiences had been based on the incorrect assumption that they existed independently as a separate entity called a *self*. That entity appears to shimmer like a mirage and dissolve into the transitional state (so great yogi masters have reported) as it dawns briefly on the dying being that he or she is in actuality space (or light or energy) itself without differentiation.

Therefore death, in this contemplative context at least, is not a question of a tangible entity with a separate existence going anywhere or doing anything, since such an entity is the very illusory dynamic which death itself erases right before our eyes, and yet we seem to continue seeing. The dying being becomes aware (all too temporarily, in what many have described as the white light encounter) that all and everything had originated in a mind luminosity which is not separate at all from the dying being, and

towards which no travel at all is possible since it's always been right in front of us, staring us in the face (not to mention around and within us).

But we – failing to recognize our own true face or nature as precisely this essentially self-produced and maintained energy – were simply too deluded by apparent concrete forms to recognize it until it's too late to do so. A flash of light ensues, we react in habitual fear and suddenly we materialize once again as a newborn baby – or, in some versions, we are drawn by visions of sexual desire back into incarnation. In any case, fear or desire, the re-embodying of awareness is thought to be a real possibility, but a failure to awaken to the clear light of nirvana. Hence the importance of bardo meditations, such as dream yoga, which are obviously useful in order to develop new and more advantageous habitual tendencies. It's not that habits per se are inherently good or bad, only that good habits can be learned, through practice and repetition, and can replace bad habits that were learned in exactly the same manner.

In conclusion, I have no particular desire for resolution or answers. As suggested, I have a high comfort level for uncertainty and ambiguity and a low threshold for any finalities that accept or reject the conjectures of other theorists. Perhaps this is because I am not a theorist. Since none of us can ever be proven right or wrong in these matters, I tend to lean towards the attitudes of those guides who offer the most spacious, flexible, generous, open minded and inclusive approaches. Any heavens or hells which arise in the midst of the post-death process of becoming are of our own making, but, even so, they cannot either hurt or help us unless we find a way to fully recognize the clear light nature of this transparent mind as it diminishes and disappears.

The truth about our consciousness and its extinction is, to paraphrase the poet Louis MacNeice in describing our crazy world, “incorrigibly plural”: there is no necessity therefore of demanding or even hoping for an either/or condition for speculating on the infinite fate of our finite awareness. So, my own theories are deceptively simple: all physical objects (including us) and the physical space in which they are situated are actually durational in nature – they are frozen or congealed time moving too slowly to be discerned as what we and they are, mirror images of constant and perpetual flux. Flux is all there ever was and all there ever will be.

Far from being merely a science fiction concept, there really is a phenomenon we could call the *archaeopsychic* and it's staring us in the face every single day. Our brains and bodies are flotsam and jetsam floating down the bloodstream of its archaic memory, itself consisting of a fluid form

of time. The non-physical property that we insist occupies our brain as a presence is also real and actual, as it is a mirror-like echo of the sound of our forms floating up or down the slipstream of this mind-made physical realm. Our brains don't die exactly, they merely return to the original form they had before being embodied.

If we are fortunate enough (what the Tibetan *Bardo Thodol* death contemplation practice calls "oh nobly born") to achieve the status of a human being in our present shapes, we are also fortunate enough to be able to access and comprehend the codes of the biological kingdom that manufactured consciousness in order to be aware of itself. If, that is, we do not shy away in fear from the simple fact of impermanence and thus manufacture more unnecessary suffering for ourselves (or the apparent others around us) than we deserve as custodians of "the great sea of its total memory" (Ballard, *The Drowned World*).

Basically, this places me squarely in the playground of the panpsychic theories, which if I am practicing certain contemplative modes from the Tibetan Buddhist bardo traditions, must perforce be my own orientation. It also follows that I tend to subscribe, from personal experience one might say, to the David Bohm notion of implicate and explicate *orders* to our experience, since the bardo practice of dream yoga so clearly involves that perspective (though in the end it privileges the implicate). I suppose it is best summed up in Bohm's words about the central underlying theme of his (eventually holographic) theory that there is "an unbroken wholeness of the totality of existence as an undivided flowing movement without borders".⁶

His research also indicated that he held what could be called a basically Gnostic viewpoint, not in the religious sense of the word but in terms of the viability of each person (particle) having the ability to personally experience the wholeness he refers to as a totality. To me this sounds very Buddhist in scope, and also links to my own personal research into the nature of pattern forming reciprocal limits without borders. When we die, it appears that the explicate order of the hologram dissolves and the implicate order of the projector is revealed, as is the unison between the two. The trick, according to the bardo practices, is to be awake, stable and aware enough to detect this degree of oneness without being afraid of the awesomeness of the realization, without projecting, and without *freaking out*, so to speak.

On a personal note, and with reference to my notions about duration itself being the conceptual crux of the flux, when I was ten years old I had a

⁶ David Bohm, *Wholeness and the Implicate Order*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980, p. 218.

spontaneous experience of something akin to what R. Maurice Bucke called “cosmic consciousness”, a transpersonal realm where the mind was not located inside the head per se but inside everything else. I was listening to an *adult* chattering on about their usual adult narratives, when they remarked to me that commonplace observation we have all heard a thousand times and maybe even uttered ourselves: “If I knew then what I know now...”, etc.

They were suggesting that at my tender age, if only I could access all the extra additional information, data, knowledge, wisdom one might accumulate from years of study and experience, my choices and actions would be impacted significantly. Thus I would be able to make decisions based on *who I would become* if I made the correct decisions. For some unaccountable reason it suddenly struck me that the mind I had then was technically identical to the mind I would have now, except presumably now with more useful information. I became aware of the mind as a *mindstream*, a fast flowing river with ever more debris, some of it useful some of it useless, that in the “future” would still somehow be “me”, but a supposedly wiser me.

I understand how this may sound somewhat exotic, but is it really any more exotic than what we now customarily accept about the hidden weirdness and uncertainties of an interconnected quantum reality? At any rate, this thought experiment has now been conducted for some fifty five years with surprisingly useful results, the most salient of which is that if there is a mindstream with which we can connect at different stages in the progression of our own lifetime, might it not also be possible to connect with a future mindstream *after* this lifetime, extending forward indefinitely?

For some reason I’ve never been fond of the word incarnation, so therefore I’m disinclined to call this potential phenomenon re-incarnation, instead opting for my already stated preference for the notion of embodiment. Therefore let’s name this, for the purposes of this discussion, not even a re-embodiment but rather a successively progressing sequence of embodiments, each one with perhaps a different personality but the same identical ... identical what? Life force? Spirit? Soul? Sentience? Words are obviously our chief conundrum here, since as Wittgenstein reminds us, the limits of language are the limits of our world, as well as the respectable fact that what we cannot talk about we must pass over in silence.

Therefore as I draw these speculations to a close, I return once again to the notion of an embodied meaning (or pattern) with which I have identified all structures that utilize any of the symbolic forms at our disposal, whether linguistic, visual, sculptural, mathematical, spiritual, musical or

architectural, and I choose to suggest that the ways to *survive* the so-called death experience of self are twofold.

The first is to create or compose something in which your consciousness is *embedded*: if you are Dostoyevsky you do this in the form of a novel like *Crime and Punishment*, if you're T.S. Eliot, in the form of *The Waste Land*, if you're Martha Graham, in the form of *Appalachian Spring*, if you're Albert Einstein, in the form of the *Theory of Relativity*, if you're John Coltrane, in the form of *A Love Supreme* ... to name but a few obvious examples. In effect, such artists in multiple mediums are the gardeners of the collective unconscious: growing these splendid blooms that are perennial, outlive them, and return to blossom with each new successive generation.

If you do not operate within the spheres of influence for these particular symbolic forms, perhaps you do so in the mundane form of the children you give birth to, name, teach and send out into the world to live on after you carrying your genes and their own obscure coded messages. If, like me, you don't choose to reproduce because you were too busy engaging in rampant speculation about what it means to be alive in the first place, perhaps you achieve the condition of an embodied meaning yourself, which in theory at least is what happens when you engage in the *Bardo Thodol* contemplative practices devoted to dream yoga and the eschatological realm of achieving a kind of continuity before, during and after death.

One can, in principle, determine through the scrupulous management of awareness during the stage of final things, to witness the transference of your personal consciousness into a transpersonal and, for lack of a better word, quantum state of consciousness, which clearly would seem to adhere to both the panpsychic and by extension the archaeopsychic domains. An example of such scrupulous management? Two of the most impressive parallels to what we Buddhists often refer to as the mirror mind in Western terms were proffered by Mikhail Bakhtin in his concept of the dialogic self in consciousness (in which we are essentially talking to ourselves and interpret this as a self, prior to engaging in a dialogic interaction with "others") and also by Charles Cooley in his concept of the looking glass mind (which of necessity begins to blur at the edges and vanish during death when the interior voice or monologue no longer has a vehicle).

These two notions are well worth further exploration in the context of their remarkable similarities to the *Bardo Thodol* technologies for intuitive insight, albeit in a primarily linguistic and cognitive science mode. Both of them are also admirably explored and clarified in a recent book by Norbert

Wiley. *Inner Speech and The Dialogic Self* (Temple University Press, 2016) offers us a fascinating platform from which to leap from our linear Western suppositions to a more lateral Buddhist perspective. I highly recommend it to the reader for further exploration of these ideas.

Surely the most important aspect of all this conjecture is not only a grasp of the self-conceptions that begin to evaporate upon the dying experience, but also the pragmatic move toward resultant actions while still alive and able to prepare for this most obvious, mysterious and awe-inspiring of all life events, the end of physical life itself.

In the end, pun intended, perhaps the real question is not so much what happens to our consciousness during the enigmatic death event, but rather how and why we were able to have *any* consciousness in the first place. And, maybe even more importantly, what did we actually do with our precious consciousness when we were still alive? And just for the record, I still plan to happily dance with Rita Hayworth in the afterlife. But I also plan to bring along a *reality sherpa* to help guide me through the emotional rapids.

Having contemplated the river in which these rapids occur for long enough to determine that it is I myself who am both the water itself as well as the turbulence being experienced, I plan to be somewhat prepared for the shock of recognition during my final moments. Since I am in no way a completely enlightened being, however, I am also quite ready both for whatever latent tendencies might result in the flickering frames of mental film as my movie runs out of my projector, hence my acceptance of Rita's presence without mistakenly thinking she is *real*. In addition, such long-term contemplation of impermanence has also provided me with the benefit of knowing quite tangibly that I am in fact already dying and departing, moment by moment, in a perpetually shifting flux which will merely continue after my final shimmering moments as "myself".

Even though I know that the self who is dying is also merely a mask worn by everything else that is *not* me, because I am still just as prone to the potential for forgetfulness shared by all the other suffering sentient beings surrounding me, I still plan to avail myself of the professional consulting services of what I have referred to as a reality sherpa. Why? Because that person, presumably a skilled practitioner who will be reading from the pages of an ancient book devoted to the passage between one life and the next, will be re-unminding me: Rita is not real, you are only dancing with the light itself. Enjoy the trip, this guide might tell me: you *are* the continuum.

IV

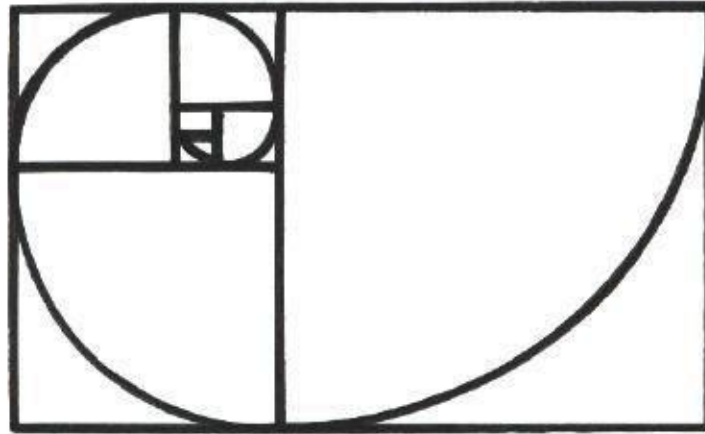


Figure 1:

I see no particular reason why this familiar diagram of the dinergy ratio known as the golden mean (1:1.618) and Fibonacci sequence, which depict a spiral growth pattern of all physical matter, wherein the relationship of the smallest part to largest part is equivalent to the relation of the largest part to the whole, cannot also depict the growth pattern of non-physical matter such as consciousness, in which the individual's mind is in an identical direct ratio to the collective unconscious, and thus continues, in a continuum growing past the limits of the individual lifetime.

(Thanks to our editor, Greg Nixon, for his close work, encouragement and assistance with this article.)

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