

Parapsychology Without Religion: "Breaking the Circle" or Circling the Wagons?

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ABSTRACT: In his book, *Breaking the Circle: Death and the Afterlife in Buddhism* (1993), Carl B. Becker argues that Buddhism is relevant to parapsychology for at least three principal reasons: (a) Buddhist literature provides a wealth of new data in the form of numerous reports on paranormal experiences of a kind that should stimulate cross-cultural studies; (b) Buddhist views on paranormal phenomena are informed by radical empiricism, an approach that should be adopted by parapsychologists; and (c) Buddhist theory and concepts (both metaphysical and epistemological) provide the best available framework for interpreting, understanding, and explaining the facts of paranormal experience in general and experiences surrounding death (such as reincarnational memories and the near-death experience) in particular. Although I agree with (a), I argue against (b) and (c) on the grounds that Buddhist ideas and approaches to the paranormal are not innocent of potentially distorting preconceptions. I point out that Buddhism is not unique in this regard, however, and that the objections I have raised against using Buddhism as a platform from which to view and interpret paranormal experience also apply to the use of any traditional religious system for that same purpose. Parapsychology must therefore be religion-free.

THE NEW POLITICS OF PARAPSYCHOLOGY

There is an old political adage that says, "The enemy of my enemy is my friend." Following this wily maxim, Richard Nixon played the "China card" against the Soviet Union. Using similar reasoning, Ronald Reagan supplied the Islamic fundamentalist rebels (*mujahadeen*) in Afghanistan with arms against the "Evil Empire" of the Soviets, even as the United States was secretly siding with Saddam Hussein in his 7-year war against the militant *mullahs* in Iran.

The problem with this Machiavellian ruse is that the chickens always come home to roost. Even the most expedient alliances have a way of backfiring. Thus, for example, the Afghan rebels were part of the same terrorist circuit that sent Islamic militants to this country to blow up tunnels, buildings, and airplanes in New York City. And, thanks in part to previous American support, Iraq invaded Kuwait and threatened the stability of the entire Persian Gulf region, thus precipitating the Gulf War and its ongoing aftermath.

Perhaps, then, the old adage is wrong after all. With "friends" like the enemy of my enemy, who needs enemies?

This book review article is based on *Breaking the Circle: Death and Afterlife in Buddhism*, by Carl B. Becker (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1993. Pp. x + 194. \$18.95 paper. LC 92-43710. ISBN 0-8093-1932-2).

Students of the politics of intellectual life would do well to ponder the aforementioned examples. This especially applies to parapsychologists, who have been waging a campaign on two fronts for years: on one side, against those fundamentalist Christians who stigmatize psychic phenomena as demonic or diabolical; and on the other side, against those "scientific" adherents of mechanistic materialism who dismiss such phenomena outright as either fraudulent or illusory. Dogmatic scientism and dogmatic monotheism—even as unconscious habits or reflexes of mind—have proven to be formidable enemies indeed.

It is therefore understandable that frustrated, battle-fatigued parapsychologists, eager to ground their piecemeal empirical studies in a comprehensive theoretical framework (one that will, in the bargain, provide them with ammunition against their critics), might be tempted to embrace certain Eastern philosophical and religious perspectives. Without question, these perspectives have historically been far more hospitable to the reality and value of paranormal experience than either the orthodox science or the orthodox religions of the West.

Thus, in his meticulously researched study of Buddhist conceptions of the afterlife, Professor Carl Becker writes with understandable enthusiasm about Asia in general:

That we should be able to construct a geography of idealistic [postmortem or supraphysical] landscapes, while mind-boggling to many Westerners, is nothing new to Asia. To name but a few, Patanjali's Yoga system, the *Visudhimagga* of the Abhidharmists, the *Meditation Sutra* of the Pure Land [Buddhist] Sects, and the [Tibetan] *Book of the Dead*, are step-by-step guides to achieving other states [of consciousness] and experiencing other realms, with the assumption that the practitioner will be able to verify for himself the teachings through discipline and practice. (p. 117)

And Buddhism in particular:

Like the early [monastic or Theravadin] Buddhists [of India], the later Mahayana Buddhists [of China, Japan, and Tibet] considered themselves to be basing their philosophy on real experience, not on fantasy. In this sense they may equally be called empiricists—but without the mechanistic materialist presuppositions that have traditionally dominated modern Western empiricism. Pure Land Buddhists accepted the provisional reality of all experiences, including dreams, visions, and meditative states. . . . The [Buddhist] view of the next world . . . is more consistent with experience and more philosophically insightful than is mechanistic billiard ball materialism, to which large sectors of the "educated" community still dogmatically cling. (p. 62; p. 122)

For Becker, what might be called "Buddhist empiricism" has much in common with parapsychologist Charles Tart's call for a "state-specific science" of altered states of consciousness. Tart, as Becker observes, is famous for having proposed that specially trained "psychonauts" should systematically investigate their own inner "idealistic realities" (p. 116)—in

other words, those dream, visionary, meditative, and other nonordinary states of mind and experiences that might be of interest to parapsychologists—from the inside. Buddhism, in Becker's view, is scientific in this, the truest, sense of the term: "The Buddha claimed that all of his conclusions were empirically testable or experienceable. The experiential tests required, however, depend on long-disciplined, carefully cultured psychic abilities, which many modern Westerners might doubt" (p. 21).

However, before eager, war-weary parapsychologists jump aboard the Buddhist (or any other religious) bandwagon, they should pause to reflect on the possible consequences of such an act. Indeed, there are potential risks involved in embracing worldviews that, for all their seeming acceptance of paranormal experience, may have hidden traps in store for the unwary. I argue, in fact, that it would be impossible for parapsychologists to maintain the kind of thoroughgoing empiricism to which Becker ardently (and rightly) aspires, if they were to adhere to the framework of any traditional religion—including Buddhism.

Before I begin, a word of caution: In order to make my case, I shall have to meander down some exotic byways of religion and philosophy. I beg the reader's indulgence. The reason for all these seeming detours will, I trust, become clear in the end.

THE PSYCHIC VERSUS THE SPIRITUAL

"This is an exciting time to look at Buddhism," writes Becker, "for Buddhism is in the process of moving from the East to the West" (p. vii). This is indeed so, as the presence of an increasing number of Buddhist teachers in the West, the growing American Buddhist movement, and the many articulate American Buddhist evangelists (e.g., Robert Thurman, Lama Surya Das) attest.

Long ago, Carl G. Jung observed, with both interest and concern, the earlier stages of this migratory process. The process had begun in earnest in the last century with the publication of Sir Edwin Arnold's *The Light of Asia* in 1879 (on the life and teachings of the Buddha), and the World's Parliament of Religions, held in Chicago in 1893. In his 1939 essay on *The Tibetan Book of the Great Liberation* (subsequently published as a psychological commentary to W. Y. Evans-Wentz's 1954 edition of that work), Jung issued a stark warning—one that remains relevant to this day. "Instead of learning the spiritual techniques of the East by heart and imitating them in a thoroughly Christian way—*imitatio Christi!*—with a correspondingly forced attitude," Jung declared, "it would be far more to the point to find out whether there exists in the unconscious an introverted tendency similar to that which has become the guiding principle of the East" (Jung, 1939/1978, p. 111).

Jung's genius lay in seeing past the historical "war" between science and religion to the underlying affinities—the secret "gentleman's agreement"—

between the Christian and materialist philosophies. For the Christian, he noted, "everything good is outside," whence it has to be fetched and pumped into our barren souls" (Jung, 1939/1978, p. 111). Only God is good; human nature is evil, and humans are but helpless, powerless worms, crawling in the feces of original sin. Salvation must be purchased from without—the function of the sacrifice of Christ. The acquisitive spirit of consumerist capitalism dovetails nicely with this religious view. Shopping is the new liturgy. Ironically, then, the Westerner's conversion to a Buddhist worldview only serves to underscore the extent to which we in the West have been unable to loosen ourselves from the cramped ideological reflexes of the acquisitive mindset. And surely Jung is right. If—as both he and Becker agree—Buddhism's central message is the importance of paying close attention to the processes of one's own consciousness, then that message will be lost in the individual's anxious efforts to appropriate an external source of wisdom. How can one look within if one is forever looking every place *but* within?

This does not mean, of course, that Buddhism has nothing to teach the West in general and parapsychology in particular; quite the contrary. As Becker suggests, the vast storehouse of data in Buddhist literature can be mined by researchers interested in making cross-cultural comparisons. For those focused on reincarnation and the survival hypothesis, the Buddhist acceptance of rebirth means a treasure trove of reports worthy of study.

Thus, for example, the Mahayana Buddhist Pure Land sects believe that dying adherents unready to directly experience nirvanic release are "saved" by Amida (or Amitabha) Buddha, and brought temporarily into the heavenly realm of the Pure Land, "a 'Buddha-field' where preparation for Nirvana is completed" (Coomaraswamy, 1988, p. 248). The Pure Land literature contains a plethora of deathbed visions and near-death experiences whose vivid imagery (e.g., dark tubular calyxes that blossom into a land of wondrous light) closely parallels the accounts of modern near-death experiencers (NDErs) and the findings of contemporary researchers such as Kenneth Ring. With this in mind, Becker concludes:

The . . . important point is the relative universality of such experiences in disparate cultures and ages, and their dramatic impact on the lives of those who encounter them. . . . The extreme coincidence of modern data with accounts from medieval China and Japan tends to reinforce the conclusion that such experiences really happened and were not simply trumped-up hoaxes or cultural myths alone. . . . It is worth bearing in mind that such experiences are neither new nor unique to any single culture. (pp. 80–81)

But Becker evidently wants to do more than merely use Buddhism as a source for paranormal experiential *data*. His principal hope, it seems, is that parapsychologists will adopt Buddhist *theory* as the most cogent philosophical grounding and best available explanation for all paranormal data, whether of ancient or modern origin. Thus, passages such as

the following tend to convey the tone usually reserved for religious apologetics:

We can begin to study how Buddhist idealism would square with the concepts of science, how Buddhist idealism might be experimentally verifiable, and how we may resolve some of the problems which superficially appear to infect any Buddhist idealist doctrine of survival. (p. 114)

Becker hastens to inform the reader in a footnote that "We speak here not of the 'starry eyed' sort of idealism found in people with *ideals*, but rather of the philosophical idealism that holds that the underlying essence of all things is *idea*" (p. 164). In other words, Buddhist metaphysics, which, according to Becker, states that "ultimately, the only real is Mind, the Absolute, formless Truth and Light" (p. 89) and, therefore, that we must "transcend this illusion of the material world" (p. 102), is *true*. (In these passages Becker is speaking specifically about the metaphysics of the Tibetan Vajrayana or Tantrayana school; however, it is fairly clear that, for him, this idealism represents the ultimate form of thought.)

If, then, the parapsychologist wishes to provide a maximally coherent account of the data of psi, one need look no further than the Buddhist sutras. To be sure, Becker does not ask the reader to accept this proposition on mere faith. He is, after all, a highly skilled academic philosopher who brings cogent arguments to bear in a reasoned defense of his position. Yet there remains the unanswered question of how a thoroughgoing philosophical empiricism of the late 20th century might be successfully married to a religious tradition far older than Christianity without compromising its integrity. Is Buddhist metaphysics really what parapsychology needs in order to make progress? Or would this marriage be a disaster?

Passages in Becker's book such as the following lead me to believe that the union of Buddhism and parapsychology would be a regrettable error:

Moreover, telepathy, clairvoyance, and out-of-body travel are accepted within the Buddhist worldview as natural results of long ascetic and meditative practice. Practice of such powers (*siddhis*) for their own sakes is condemned by the Buddha. Not only are they unproductive to enlightenment, but they are likely to distract the practitioner from more spiritual goals. (p. 16)

Paranormal experiences are accepted by the Buddhist worldview, all right—but that acceptance is highly conditional. First, in Buddhist thinking "the psychic" is less valuable and important than "the spiritual" and may indeed become an obstacle to "higher" (spiritual) development. Second, psychic powers such as clairvoyance and telepathy are merely the secondary by-products of yogic disciplines learned, says Becker, "preferably under the careful supervision of trained masters" (p. 123). In other words, psi is more like an acquired skill than a natural faculty or capacity inherent and spontaneously operating in all human beings, regardless of their specific cultural programming.

What these conditions suggest is that paranormal experience will have to be tailored to fit Buddhist theory, rather than vice versa. But surely this will force the experience into an uncomfortable procrustean bed where its real significance will be distorted and mutilated rather than illuminated.

Consider, in this light, two core tenets of Buddhism, both of which assert the absolute reality of change and the merely illusory character of permanence and continuity. The doctrine of *Anitya* states that "impermanence is the inextinguishable, fundamental and pitiless law of all existence" (Coomaraswamy, 1988, p. 93). A basic corollary of this view is the doctrine of *Anatman*, which states that "there exists no changeless entity in any thing, and above all, no eternal soul" [or perdurable ego] in man" (Coomaraswamy, 1988, p. 98). What impact might such ideas have on a free and unbiased parapsychological investigation of paranormal experiences such as the NDE and kindred questions about survival of death?

Happily, here mere speculation can give way to concrete example. Philosopher and parapsychologist Michael Grosso (1997) has called for a rational inquiry into those paranormal beliefs that, for many, have historically been accepted on faith. He notes that many religious adherents might find such a prospect deeply threatening—fearful, perhaps that an impartial scientific investigation (and objective philosophical reflection) "might upset their preconceptions," thereby "caus[ing] them undue anxiety" (Grosso, 1997, p. 2). "Or, as a Buddhist friend of mine once opined, if there is 'no soul' of importance that might survive, why bother doing research on it?" (Grosso, 1997, p. 2). As Grosso understands, our ideas, of what is possible shape—and thus limit—the scope of our empirical inquiries. In all old-fashioned systems of religious ideas, certain questions never even get asked because they tremble on the verge of heresy. Grosso wisely concludes that "such ideas are poor incentives to research. So let's lay aside our philosophical and religious preconceptions, and try to look at the data with fresh eyes" (Grosso, 1997, p. 2).

There is another telling example, this one supplied by the Australian sociologist and NDE researcher Cherie Sutherland (1995). She tells the story of a woman named Shana who went into anaphylactic shock on the operating table during a simple surgical procedure and found herself in an "incredible golden world filled with Christ light" (Sutherland, 1995, p. 181). Unable afterward to fully integrate her experience, Shana did not speak of her NDE for 5 long years. Then she went on a Buddhist meditation retreat. Believing she was among people who would accept her experience, she talked about it openly for the very first time. But then she came to the part in her narrative when she told of exiting her body through the top of her head. Hearing this, her Buddhist hosts insisted that she was wrong, that she was misdescribing her own NDE, for "only saints and gurus go out through the top [of the head], and all the rest of us leave through the feet" (Sutherland, 1995, p. 182). Shana told Sutherland that her experience with the dogmatic Buddhists so traumatized her that, once again, she refused to

talk about the experience for years afterward. And when she finally did openly discuss it, she chose her audience with great care.

Shana's experience had a profoundly positive influence on her life. But, contra Buddhist expectations, it was completely spontaneous rather than assiduously cultivated. Moreover, it did not fit the required phenomenological pattern. How could she (a mere 23-year-old nursing student) possibly have an experience reserved for long-practicing gurus and great saints? What then would be the point of all that meditational practice and all that spiritual perfection? What indeed?

Or perhaps the stumbling block for her Buddhist friends was that Shana was a *woman* who had an experience once reserved exclusively for male gurus and saints. In his preface, Becker himself notes (albeit in passing) the strong patriarchal bias of Buddhist traditions: "Because historically women have not had the opportunity to participate in the kinds of meditative and literary practices that I describe, I have not used gender inclusive language in my discussion" (p. ix).

But this linguistic gender exclusivism is no mere sideshow. Nor is it simply a relic of an outdated set of social practices and conventions. The old patriarchal disdain of the female and the feminine is at the very heart of the Buddhist metaphysics of absolute idealism that Becker would recommend to the parapsychologist. For the classic tension between "the psychic" and "the spiritual" (correctly noted by Becker himself) is part and parcel of a familiar scheme of religious evolution. I am referring, of course, to the old-fashioned pyramidal model of an ascending ladder of ontology and value, in which the lower stages of development figure as mere stepping stones to the higher. This is the hierarchical scheme of the so-called "perennial philosophy" that relegates the body—which, in Becker's view, "is more temporary and less important than the cultivation of the mind" (p. 108)—to the lowest rungs, far below (in ascending order) mind, psyche, and, finally, at the apex, spirit. Women, as the source of new life (and, by extension, the source of all suffering) are perceived as being chained to the bottom rungs of the body and its biological drives and urges; they are more readily driven by the "ignorant cravings" of crude fear and desire. The masculine aim is to "purify" spirit (or what the idealist philosopher would call absolute mind or consciousness) by severing its attachments to the ultimately illusory body, mind, and psyche, thereby achieving true enlightenment and liberation: nirvanic release from life.

The poet Robert Bly (1990) suggests that this traditional vertical image of spiritual development attracts a certain psychological type, which he labels "grandiose ascenders" (or "flying boys" and even "flying girls"). These individuals are "giddily spiritual" and "do not inhabit their own bodies well" (Bly, 1990, p. 57). From such a lofty, aristocratic perspective, the real aim of the perennial philosophy in general and Buddhism in particular is to fly high and away from plebeian old Mother Earth, once and for all. Becker writes:

The Buddha did not envision rebirth in a happy heaven as the ultimate goal of life. Even heavenly realms, although pleasant, are causally conditioned and therefore impermanent, producing additional suffering in their demise. The common majority of suffering humanity might well wish to escape its suffering even temporarily through a heavenly rebirth. A more enlightened perspective would suggest that the entire cycle of birth, death, rebirth, and change is inextricably interlaced with suffering. In that case, the ultimate goal to be sought is not a temporary stay in heaven but a permanent release from the entire cycle of birth and death. (p. 23)

What exactly is "nirvana"? Becker deftly refutes those Christian critics of Buddhism who have tarred Buddhism with the brush of nihilism by denying that nirvana can simply be equated with the sheer annihilation of the individually existing self. Nor does it equate with an eternal preservation of personal identity as in the traditional Christian view of heaven. It is neither this nor that, but in a sense both this *and* that. That is to say, Becker rather favors a "mystical" or paradoxical interpretation of nirvana that allows for the indescribability of the experience in terms of our typically dualistic, either/or language:

With typical Buddhist logic, we are left with this conclusion: Nirvana neither exists nor does not exist, i.e., it is neither within the realm of existence as we know it, nor is it an illusion. The saint is not reborn, nor does he die, nor is it proper to use any ordinary adjectives about the ineffable state he experiences. His old personality does not continue, and yet the person is not utterly annihilated. Such a state of nirvana is achievable, and it is a viable alternative to rebirth after death. (p. 43)

Nineteenth-century psychical research was preoccupied (some might say obsessed) with finding some sort of rational and empirical basis for beliefs in the afterlife and the soul that had theretofore simply been taken on faith, a faith that people like William James and Henry Sidgwick could no longer uncritically embrace—hence the overriding concern of psychical researchers with "human personality and its survival of bodily death" (to borrow the title from the classic work of F. W. H. Myers [1903/1975]). And to the extent that 20th century parapsychologists have consciously or unconsciously allowed their inquiries to be shaped by this earlier set of preconceptions, the Buddhist alternative to standard Western ideas of survival may indeed—as Becker clearly hopes—prove salutary. Confronting the concept of nirvana may snap the Western mind out of its trance-like habits of thought simply by providing a much different perspective. Instead of fixating upon the strictly empirical question of "Survival: yes or no?" and our reflexive assumptions about the nature and value of individuality, the Buddhist-inspired reframing of the question into "What do we really *mean* by 'survival'?" refocuses the debate by drawing our attention to the deeper, philosophical questions at hand (which are always questions of meaning). This, I venture, was the aim of Raymond Moody (1999) in his recent, radically iconoclastic examination of the near-death experience and his own previous paranormal research. And I also suspect that it is what that

inveterate student of the paranormal, Colin Wilson, was getting at when, in the postscript to his volume on the *Afterlife*, he wrote that "To know that there was life after death would certainly 'alter everything.' Yet in another sense, it would alter nothing" (Wilson, 1985, pp. 238–239). It would alter everything because dogmatic materialism would stand refuted. The notion that physical death represents the absolute end of the individual and of consciousness as such has inspired profound feelings of pointlessness and futility among ordinary people and philosophers alike. Yet, as Wilson goes on to observe, merely knowing that death is not the end does not answer the ultimate ontological question: Why is there something rather than nothing? Why is there existence rather than non-existence?

If Buddhism does not provide a direct answer to this supreme metaphysical question regarding existence as such, it does nevertheless manage to express a subtly negative attitude toward embodied existence in particular. "All life is sorrowful" is the first and most important of the Buddha's Four "Noble" (i.e., Great) Truths. Thus the Buddhist project of what Becker calls "breaking the circle"—in other words, of becoming dis-embodied by shedding the "sheer illusion" of separateness—may be seen to flow from a visceral rejection of the conditions of human life as they are. In basic attitude, this is not really so different after all from the Christian belief in and hope for bodily resurrection, which implies that there is something inherently wrong (sinful) or "unspiritual" about the body in its natural, untransmogrified state. In both of these traditional religious iconographies, the circle of life—the natural cycle of birth and death—is essentially a negative symbol of life's wearisome round and folly, the horrific image of the utter vanity of existence.

BREAKING THE CIRCLE OR MENDING THE HOOP?

However, as the mythologist Joseph Campbell points out, this was not always and everywhere so. The circle (or wheel) of life originally had a positive meaning when nature and the body were embraced rather than rejected with disdain or dismissed as illusory. In the earliest Egyptian funerary art, for example, the emphasis is on the joys of everyday life in this world rather than the fears and hopes surrounding death and an afterlife in the next. He cites Egyptologist John A. Wilson's observations of a people whose funerary art "stress[es] the pleasure in an abounding harvest, delight in nature, enjoyment of the hunt, and the excitement of feasts and games" (in Campbell, 1976a, p. 137). Rather than a mournful melancholy, the early Egyptians, according to Wilson, give the overall impression of a self-confident sense of "optimism, and a lust for life"; an attitude that "produced an energetic assertion of eternally continuing life" (in Campbell, 1976a, p. 137). Specifically concerning the symbol of the circle or wheel of life, Campbell writes with great eloquence:

From what we know of the temper of early cultures, it is safe to assume that the myths, rites, and philosophies first associated with these symbols were rather positive than negative in their address to the pains and pleasures of existence. However, in the period of Pythagoras in Greece (c. 582-500? B.C.) and the Buddha in India (563-483 B.C.), there occurred what I have called the Great Reversal. Life became known as a fiery vortex of delusion, desire, violence, and death, a burning waste. "All things are on fire," taught the Buddha in his sermon at Gaya, and in Greece the Orphic saying "*Soma sema*: The body is a tomb" gained currency at this time, while in both domains the doctrine of reincarnation, the binding of the soul forever to this meaningless round of pain, only added urgency to the quest for some means of release. In the Buddha's teaching, the image of the turning spoked wheel, which in the earlier period had been symbolic of the world's glory, thus became a sign, on the one hand, of the wheeling round of sorrow, and, on the other, release in the sunlike doctrine of illumination. And in the classical world the turning spoked wheel appeared also at this time as an emblem rather of life's defeat and pain than of victory and exhilaration in the image and myth of Ixion . . . bound by Zeus to a blazing wheel of eight spokes, to be sent whirling for all time through the air. (Campbell, 1976b, pp. 420-421)

This image of the whirling force of the destructive passion for life was not unknown to Christian Europe, which suspected all such natural impulses as the darkest of the dark, the original sin. "Thou art a soul in bliss," poor, mad, tortured Lear declares to his all-too-beloved daughter Cordelia in Act IV, Scene VII of Shakespeare's great tragedy: "But I am bound upon a wheel of fire, that mine own tears . . . Do scald like molten lead" (Shakespeare, 1978, p. 401).

Of course, Plato had absorbed the Orphic doctrine, which was later picked up by Saint Augustine when he discovered Plato's *Phaedo*. Thus Christianity and Buddhism alike were born in the crucial historical turning point of what Campbell calls the Great Reversal: "when, for many in the Orient as well as in the West, the sense of holiness departed from their experience both of the universe and of their own nature" (Campbell, 1976a, p. 36). Rather than delight in nature and in the joys, both large and small, of everyday life in the world, "a yearning for release from what was felt to be an insufferable state of sin, exile, or delusion supervened" (Campbell, 1976a, p. 36). To be sure, the modes of salvation chosen by the Christian and Buddhist Reversalists differed greatly. As Jung had emphasized, Christianity preferred the belief in the outside power of the savior; whereas early Buddhism, in particular, stressed what Jung termed the self-liberating power of the introverted mind.

Yet, despite the overall differences in their respective ideas and methods of salvation, in Campbell's view (and in this I agree), the dominant religious traditions of both West and East alike are indelibly stained by the darker hues of world rejection. Mother Earth, the womb of our mundane experience, is denigrated and rejected because She is perceived as having abandoned us to our suffering. (The "flying people . . . are open to terrible

shocks of abandonment" [1990, p. 57], writes Bly.) Life in the here and now is dismissed as an unendurably tragic play (eternally recurring, even). It would be better to demand a refund for the price of admission than to be forced to see the thing through to the end—or worse yet, to have to endure yet another dreary performance (reincarnation or rebirth).

Just here a critical question might be raised: But what about the Mahayana Buddhist ideal of the bodhisattva? Surely there is no world rejection here—and therefore, no tacit, enduring dualism between this world and the next—for the bodhisattva embraces this world and thus reconciles all opposites. Thus, according to the Indologist Heinrich Zimmer:

Whereas in the [earlier] Hinayana the term *bodhisattva* denotes one who is on the point of consecration into Buddhahood (for example, Guatama was a Bodhisattva prior to his awakening under the Bo Tree), in the [later] Mahayana tradition the term designates those sublimely indifferent, compassionate beings who remain at the threshold of nirvana for the comfort and salvation of the world. Out of perfect indifference (egolessness) and perfect compassion (which is also egolessness) the Mahayana Bodhisattva does not experience the "real or true enlightenment" (*samyaksambodhi*) of the Buddha and then pass on to final extinction (*parinirvana*), but stops at the brink—the brink of time and eternity—and thus transcends that pair of opposites: for the world will never end; the round of the cosmic eons will go on and on without ceasing; the vow of the Bodhisattva, to remain at the brink till all shall go in before him, amounts to a vow to remain as he is forever. And this is the reason why his vow is world-redemptive. Through it the truth is symbolized that time and eternity, *samsara* and *nirvana*, do not exist as pairs of opposites but are equally "emptiness" (*sunyata*), the void. (Zimmer, 1969, pp. 534-535)

But does this really imply a full-fledged embrace of the world, the body, the earth? And does it thereby indeed overcome all lingering dualisms? I think not. What is emphatically *not* embraced is the personal ego, the *principium individuationis*, which still remains beyond the pale. No amount of self-concern or self-assertion is morally legitimate since, as Zimmer notes, to be perfect means to be perfectly egoless. Indeed, perfectly egoless is what the guru is supposed to be and supposed to teach to the pupil. However, Campbell himself—who was not only an admirer of Buddhism (and Hinduism) but also Zimmer's close friend, editor, and translator—eventually came to reject the guru model as too authoritarian and stifling of all true individuality.

Campbell noted that the traditional Asian idea of the guru-chela relationship holds that the chela (student) owes his or her guru nothing short of absolute submission. What is required is a total relinquishment of responsibility on the part of the chela, whereby the guru even assumes responsibility for the moral life of the individual. Campbell did not regard this as appropriate or in keeping with the distinctive spiritual contribution of the West, which he associated both with the early European hunting societies as well as with their counterparts in the hunter-gatherer tribes of the Native

Americans. In this emphatically individualist tradition, "each of us is a unique creature, and consequently has a unique path" to follow, whereas "one of the typical things in the Orient is that any criticism disqualifies you for the guru's instruction" (in Maher & Briggs, 1988, pp. 72-73, 75).

As social philosophers Joel Kramer (himself both a longtime practitioner as well as a teacher of yoga) and Diana Alstad have suggested, "the positive and necessary aspects of self-centeredness related to creativity and individuation are overlooked" (Kramer & Alstad, 1993, p. 358) in a moral scheme that extols perfect egotism and perfect submission. Also, from a metaphysical standpoint, such a scheme remains implicitly dualistic, since the reality and value of connectedness is upheld and extolled at the expense of separateness, which remains strictly illusory and the cause of all suffering:

The Buddhist Void posits ultimate reality as devoid of differentiation and is structurally identical to the [Hindu] concept of Oneness. Buddhism replaces Hindu *maya* ("All is illusion") with "All is change," making continuity (and thus identity) the illusion. Both change and illusion serve the same function—to deny the reality of normal reality (the world of individuated form). The primary Buddhist agenda of doing away with suffering is geared at doing away with the individual self that suffers through creating "unreal" boundaries. Making interconnectedness the ultimate reality in the world of ever-changing forms is an attempt to do away with the subjects that connect (and suffer) as well as with the less emotionally appealing traditional Void. This is none other than the age-old hidden dualism between reality and illusion, however defined. (Kramer & Alstad, 1993, pp. 322-323)

Campbell finds this same world-denying disdain for the individual expressed in the mainstream Hindu-Buddhist conception of yoga (which Jung regarded as the chief method of self-liberation in the East) and its view of paranormal powers (*siddhis*) or experiences, which Becker accurately claims the Buddhist finds "unconducive to enlightenment" and "likely to distract the practitioner from more spiritual goals" (p. 16). After all, why bother to develop powers that may only strengthen the ego and its attachment to the web of life when it is that very ego that needs to be burned out and those very connections that must be severed? Thus, while there are indeed numerous references to the *siddhi* in the Hindu and Buddhist texts, Campbell observes that "the dominant spiritual tradition requires that all interest in [*siddhi*] should be abandoned" (Campbell, 1976a, p. 425). The typical candidate for yogic illumination must possess "a deep yearning for disengagement" [author's italics] (Campbell, 1976a, p. 425). A true *yogin* aspires to transcend everything "worldly," that is, everything "tainted" with the "stain" of individuality—including the *siddhi*.

Yet, Campbell also notes that this "dominant spiritual tradition" is opposed by certain recessive tendencies, present even within the tradition itself, which call for and express a deep yearning for engagement with, rather than disengagement from, life in the physical world. Campbell

questions whether Yoga is essentially or necessarily or even typically associated with world negation or rejection (Campbell, 1976a, p. 212). He notes that in the popular mind of India today, yoga is primarily associated with the acquisition and use of *siddhis* rather than world-release. He also hints that these popular notions may have an historical basis in the earliest known forms of yogic discipline and ideals.

Not only in the popular mind (or distant past) of India, says Campbell, but also in the highest ideal of the Taoist sage in China one can see reflected a far more positive attitude toward *siddhis* (Chinese: *te*)—and, by implication, toward life and nature itself. It is this earthly power that the *Tao Té Ching* dubs "the Mysterious Female . . . the base from which Heaven and Earth sprang . . . It is there within us all the while; Draw upon it as you will, it never runs dry" (in Campbell, 1976a, p. 425).

Of course, both Taoism and the archaic (as well as present-day popular) religious mind of India is informed by that "mere animism" that Becker seems willing to casually "dismiss" (p. 86) in favor of what he deems "the more enlightened perspective" of the Buddha. That perspective, as Becker notes, does not celebrate nature and seek its wisdom but is in quest of "permanent release from the entire cycle of birth and death" (p. 23).

The idea of breaking the circle is actually nothing new on the American continent. The old Ojigala Sioux Medicine Man Black Elk explained to the Nebraskan poet John Neihardt that when the whites came and broke the sacred circle ("hoop") of his people by disrespecting nature and her ways, the Sioux lost their power:

You have noticed that everything an Indian does is in a circle, and that is because the Power of the World always works in circles, and everything tries to be round. In the old days when we were a strong and happy people, all our power came to us from the sacred hoop of the nation, and so long as the hoop was unbroken, the people flourished. The flowering tree was the living center of the hoop, and the circle of the four quarters nourished it. The east gave peace and light, the south gave warmth, the west gave rain, and the north with its cold and mighty wind gave strength and endurance. This knowledge came to us from the outer world with our religion. Everything the Power of the World does is done in a circle. The sky is round, and I have heard that the earth is round like a ball, and so are all the stars. The wind, in its greatest power, whirls. Birds make their nests in circles, for theirs is the same religion as ours. The sun comes forth and goes down again in a circle. The moon does the same, and both are round. Even the seasons form a great circle in their changing, and always come back to where they were. The life of a man is a circle from childhood to childhood, and so it is in everything where power moves. Our tepees were round like the nests of birds, and these were always set in a circle, the nation's hoop, a nest of many nests, where the Great Spirit meant for us to hatch our children. (Neihardt, 1932/1972, pp. 164-165)

If Michael Grosso's call to fellow parapsychologists to "lay aside our philosophical and religious preconceptions" (Grosso, 1997, p. 2) were truly heeded, the first step might consist in questioning whether the circle has

already been broken for far too long. That would be the first step in decriminalizing nature and thus bringing the body and its natural (earthly, imaginative) language into parapsychology—where it has always belonged.

ALL SYSTEMS FAIL: THE END OF RELIGION AND THE BIRTH OF PARAPSYCHOLOGY

Parapsychologists encouraged by Becker's advice to contemplate the paranormal in terms of Buddhist categories and concepts cannot afford to remain unaware of the mythological and metaphysical subtext I have presented here. This is particularly true for those of us who share his most laudable aim of operating with a radically open-ended empiricism that does not bow to a dogmatic mechanistic materialism. The reason is that these ideas, and the archetypal images in which they are deeply grounded, do indeed matter; they have real consequences, not only for parapsychological theory, but even more importantly and profoundly, for paranormal *experience*. In the absence of such primary experiences, there would be no need for lofty theory and clever theoreticians.

Here we should attend to the voice of the artist and psychic Ingo Swann, who is surely one of the most studied paranormal experiencers ever. He has described with great perspicacity his early work in the laboratory and the reasons why initial failures in his performance were transformed into successes. I cite him here at length for this reason.

For example, in 1971 when I first volunteered as a psychic test subject, I tried to evoke my telepathy, clairvoyance, and out-of-body perceptions through the labels as I (then) conceived them. The results were negative and emotionally quite humiliating. . . . Based upon these first results, the only possible and logical conclusion would have been that I did not possess ESP at all, and that would have been the end of it. . . . Contrasting these early failures were events in my life that seemed to me obviously extrasensory in nature. So what was wrong? . . . [I]t gradually became clear that spontaneous ESP events (which I had experienced often, and which most other people do also) were something quite different from the way my intellectual learning was thinking about them. . . . Spontaneous ESP events occurred by themselves via rules and logic of their own (usually taking normal intellectual consciousness by surprise). . . . To put this another way, my labels served as filters or barriers to true real ESP experience! The labels were acting as mental preconceptions about what *should* be experienced intellectually, when in reality (as it turned out) these preconceptions were the night side to ESP's day side mechanisms. It was only after I learned to detach myself from the power of these labels that some of ESP's mechanisms revealed themselves. (Swann, 1991, pp. 7-9)

It was only when Swann allowed the phenomena to speak to him in *their* own terms rather than *his* that he began not only to have the experiences on a reliable and repeatable basis, but also to understand them. And if I

understand him correctly, his major innovation was to overcome the overt ideological prohibitions (and more surreptitious prejudices) against bringing the *body* into the work. The very term "*extrasensory perception*," which implies that the ordinary physical senses have nothing to do with paranormal powers, proved to be a barrier in this respect. When he ceased to think of clairvoyance and telepathy as exclusively mental phenomena and began to conceive of these powers also as extensions of his bodily awareness, he greatly improved his "hits" in controlled conditions. Similarly, when he was allowed to bypass intellectual interpretations by using his imagination, motor skills, and artistic abilities to physically draw targets perceived in out-of-body states rather than merely attempting to describe them verbally, he dramatically improved his ratio of "hits" to "misses." Swann concludes that it is our a priori concepts (or what he dubs our "representational universe")—whether skeptical materialist or old-fashioned idealist—that stand in the way of our psi experiences and the development of theories that will help, rather than hinder, our understanding of reality. "As long as we continue to think of things as we have only chanced to represent them to ourselves," he writes, "the real facts of the unknown will remain invisible and unrecognized" (Swann, 1991, p. 7).

Like any other of the so-called "higher" religions that arose in the process of marginalizing the "lower" nature religions (i.e., "mere animism"), Buddhism is a scrupulously codified, relatively closed "representational universe" of words and images—that is, sacred texts. It is a system (or, to be more precise, a family of related systems) of theory and practice that cannot, in the final analysis, welcome challenges to its fundamental beliefs. (I shall expand upon this idea below.) Thus Buddhism—much like the rigidly architectonic scheme of the perennial philosopher (Wilber, 1985, pp. 157-186)—will have its own obscuring effects on the phenomena that the parapsychologist dearly wishes to investigate in a systematic and unbiased (i.e., truly scientific) way.

Becker may well be right to suggest that the monistic idealism characteristic of Buddhism and the perennial philosophy is more "holistic" (p. 129) or coherent than either the traditional Christian view or Cartesian dualism. (The former, of course, posits a veritable war between spirit and flesh, while the latter posits the reality of two absolutely separate substances, mind and matter, whose relationship remains not simply mysterious but murky and unintelligible.) He may also be right in supposing that this type of idealism can account for more of our actual experience—especially experiences of the paranormal—than a crabbed, dogmatic metaphysical materialism.

Nevertheless, the view of embodied existence as an unfortunate illusion or delusion to be overcome seems at best a minor improvement over the traditional Christian abhorrence of the body as little more than a "hissing cauldron of lust" (St. Augustine, 397/1961, p. 55). It is only marginally more positive than the materialist's reductive image of "man: a machine" (to borrow the title of Julien Offray de la Mettrie's [1748/1912] infamous

work), blindly driven by what one of our most famous materialists described as the dark "instinctual wishes . . . of incest, cannibalism and lust for killing" (Freud, 1927/1961, p. 10). Thus Buddhist "holism," no less than its religious and philosophical rivals, is a form of what the Oxford philosopher R. G. Collingwood diagnosed as the procrustean, self-mutilating unity "of the plucked-out eye and the lopped off limb" (Collingwood, 1924, p. 38). A truly all-inclusive holism would not ask us to deny the reality or denigrate the value of any feature of our experience—including the experience of separation, of living in a human body and having a strong ego capable of rational judgment and unencumbered critical reflection.

That is why I reject Becker's suggestion that the future progress of parapsychology depends upon its adoption of a monistic idealism à la Bishop Berkeley, the Buddha, or Vedanta. According to Becker, "[Gardner] Murphy has found that even physicists are coming closer to the acceptance of a Berkeleyan idealism, and this claim is at least superficially substantiated by [Lawrence] LeShan's surveys" (p. 115).

To be sure, Becker is here in good company, for there are many others who speak hopefully of a "new synthesis" of science and religion in the form of a growing coincidence between quantum physics and the perennial philosophy or the mysticism of the East. He is also factually correct in stating that there are those who wish to use the perennial philosophy (as explicated by Ken Wilber and other transpersonal theorists) as a springboard for launching a critical appraisal of parapsychology. Take, for example, the Polish philosopher Mishka Jambor, who has argued that both "positive" (heavenly) and "negative" (hellish) near-death experiences (NDEs), when viewed from the apex of "the Great Chain of Being of the perennial philosophy" (Jambor, 1997, p. 168), will alike be seen to be illusory. To the perennialist, both the positive and negative poles of experience only serve to reflect the ignorance of the worldly mind hopelessly stuck on the lower, penultimate rungs of the ladder of consciousness. There is, says Jambor, a primordial fall into individuality, "a fall from divinity, and simultaneously a fall, or 'involution' . . . into worldliness . . . reflect[ive of] that primordial split of undifferentiated consciousness, the Beyond" (Jambor, 1997, p. 169). Jambor then cites Sri Aurobindo (a key spokesman for the perennialist view), who states that "even the highest individual perfection, even the blissful cosmic condition is no better than a supreme ignorance. All that is individual, all that is cosmic has to be austere renounced by the seeker of the Absolute Truth" (in Jambor, 1997, p. 174).

For the perennialist, the experience of psi, its wonders and terrors—like the sense of divinity in nature, the delight in the senses, or the personal satisfactions of creativity—is illusory. It is part and parcel of the "fall" of pure consciousness into the "fragmented" existence of individuality and its attendant miseries. Only the ultimate condition of pure consciousness is real and worthwhile; everything else is unreal and worthless. Wholeness

can only be achieved by cutting and running (or rather, by flying up, up, and away from the body and the Earth).

However, parapsychology need not settle for the religious philosophies of the Great Reversal. A close reading of the best work among the new physicists reveals a movement light-years ahead of both old-fashioned mechanistic materialism and old-fashioned absolute idealism. This genuinely new form of holism is represented, for example, in the views of the late physicist David Bohm (1980). He suggested that the whole of the "implicate order," or the invisible level of the infinite process of reality, is completely present in all of its distinct but inextricably interconnected "explicate" parts (that is, its finite visible manifestations). In a revealing interview with philosopher René Weber, Bohm ardently maintained that "the mysticism which would devalue cosmic consciousness and hold only to the transcendent experience is absurd" (in Wilber, 1985, p. 193). He went on to suggest that the animist traditions that are usually derogated by the "higher" religions have a lot to teach us:

Indeed, many people experience this vast totality in nature, without even thinking of it as mysticism. Something of that totality is revealed to us when we perceive matter in its vastness and depth as displayed in the earth and the sky and the universe itself—matter in which life and intelligence are immanent and implicit . . . One of the weaknesses of some of the religions is that they have exalted spirituality and devalued matter. Yet the Zuni religion says that every person is a brother because the Earth is his mother and the Sun his father. This grounding has been lost in Christianity, which makes the brotherhood of man depend entirely on his descent from God the Father. But the brotherhood of man can be seen concretely in the sense that everyone springs from the same earth, depends on it for life, and returns to it at death. Brotherhood exists not only in spirit but also in matter, confirming the ancient hermetic view: "As above, so below." One of the earlier forms of mysticism would have stated it: "As in spirit, so in matter," a position which can also be developed from modern physics. . . . In the old physics, matter (which was the only reality) was completely mechanical, leaving no room for mind. But if, according to the new physics, everything is enfolded in everything else, then there is no real separation of domains. Mind grows out of matter. And matter contains the essence of mind. (In Wilber, 1985, pp. 193–194)

In other words, it is not the illusion of matter that we need to transcend, but rather, our illusions about matter (and the body) that need to be overcome. But neither materialism nor idealism can manage such a feat. These exhausted philosophies have nothing new to say.

Thankfully, Bohm was not alone in seeking a genuinely new and thoroughly comprehensive form of holism in which the body, matter, and ordinary life in the world would not be denigrated or devalued in favor of flight into a pure, otherworldly transcendence. For example, Steven M. Rosen (1994) has long been arguing along similar lines, as his work both in and out of parapsychology clearly demonstrates. And Rhea A. White

(1994) has contributed in a singular fashion to the re-visioning of psi as an organic element of human nature, absolutely integral to the ongoing unfolding of our deepest potential. Her position stands in stark contrast, both to the view of psi as the exclusive property of a few specially gifted "freaks" ("psychics") to be studied in the laboratory, as well as to the view of psi as an obstacle to the spiritual advancement of an élite group of ostensibly "selfless" gurus and their pupils.

The central problem, however, is by no means restricted to Buddhism. Indeed, of all the great world religions that came into being at the time of the Great Reversal, Buddhism is without doubt the most acutely self-conscious and self-consciously iconoclastic. Where else but in a text written by a Zen Buddhist monk and teacher could one read a passage like the following: "Do not be idolatrous about or bound to any doctrine, theory, or ideology, even Buddhist ones. All systems of thought are guiding means; they are not absolute truth . . . Humankind suffers very much from attachment to views" (Nhat Hanh, 1987, p. 89).

Nevertheless, as the previously cited examples of Buddhist intransigence provided by Grosso and Sutherland suggest, there is a yawning gap between theory and practice. And this is no fault of the particular individuals concerned. It is not a question of greater effort or defective virtue. What is at fault in this regard is not individual Buddhist practitioners or even Buddhism as such, but rather, the very idea of a system of thought and practice that is implicit in *all* the religions—including the materialist religion of scientism embraced by such ardent psi-cops as philosopher Paul Kurtz. Kurtz, who declares without hesitation in the Humanist Manifesto II that "Modern science discredits such historic concepts as the 'ghost in the machine' and the 'separable soul'" (in Kurtz & Wilson, 1973, pp. 16-17), has his own peculiar set of what the philosopher R. G. Collingwood termed "absolute presuppositions" (Collingwood, 1940/1972, p. 31). These are the unquestioned and unquestionable assumptions that form the epistemic basis of every traditional system. They are, as Collingwood said, simply taken for granted. And Buddhist systems, I would add, are no exception to this general rule.

"Routine," declared Alfred North Whitehead, "is the god of every social system" (Whitehead, 1933/1955, p. 96). That god, like all gods, demands sacrifices. What is sacrificed to the god of (religious) systems is creative intelligence and its muse, spontaneity, which is inextricably linked to the ability and willingness to raise the very sort of fundamental questions that might upend the basic assumptions governing the operation of the system. As Whitehead well knew, "A system will be the product of intelligence. But when the adequate routine is established, intelligence vanishes, and the system is maintained by a coordination of conditioned reflexes" (Whitehead, 1933/1955, p. 96).

What is true for social systems is likewise true of the ideologies that guide and inform them, for as Collingwood (1916) long ago recognized, theory and practice are inseparable parts of a whole. No theory is innocent

of practical consequences, and even the most ritualized performances have their origin and significance in purposes, intentions, and meanings. Bohm, too, understood this—that, in truth, all systems of thought or action are reflexively "fundamentalist" insofar as they are preprogrammed to circle the wagons. Systems will attempt to shield themselves from what they perceive as attacks, that is, from rational criticism of a deeply serious kind. This is true whether that criticism comes from external sources or whether it comes from its own members engaged in acts of self-criticism that lead to a deep questioning of the system's foundations. As Bohm observed, the categorical imperative of any system is to preserve intact its fundamental character and meaning, even as it seeks to modify itself in peripheral ways in order to adapt and survive:

A system isn't necessarily [entirely] closed. It can be open to various influences of things coming in and out. That's the whole idea of a system. It's not necessarily closed, but it has a certain stability of structure. It tends to sustain and maintain its structure, so that when something from the outside comes in it reacts in *such a way as to avoid basic change*. (Bohm, 1992, pp. 22-23) [Italics added]

Buddhism originated, in part, as an intelligent insight into change. But when that fluid insight is pumped into the rigid container of an old-fashioned religious system, it inevitably becomes as stagnant as any other religious form—its own injunction not to mistake the finger pointing at the moon for the moon itself, notwithstanding.

TOWARD A RELIGION-FREE PARAPSYCHOLOGY

If the flaw is systemic, then, fortunately, so is the solution: Keep parapsychology free of the taint of *all* traditional religious systems. Parapsychologists wishing to employ a non-distorting philosophical framework that will not continue to insure that, in Swann's words, "the real facts of the unknown will remain invisible and unrecognized," would do well to study the work of pioneers like Bohm, Rosen, White, Grosso, and Moody. Their respective approaches give us permission to listen to the (paranormal) experiences of life as they speak to us in all their pregnant fullness, uncensored by the Old Time Religions and unencumbered by the shopworn philosophical systems of the past. We need to build on their achievements. Only then will parapsychologists truly be able to break the vicious circle (of rising hope followed by crushing disappointment) and make genuine progress in their discipline.

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