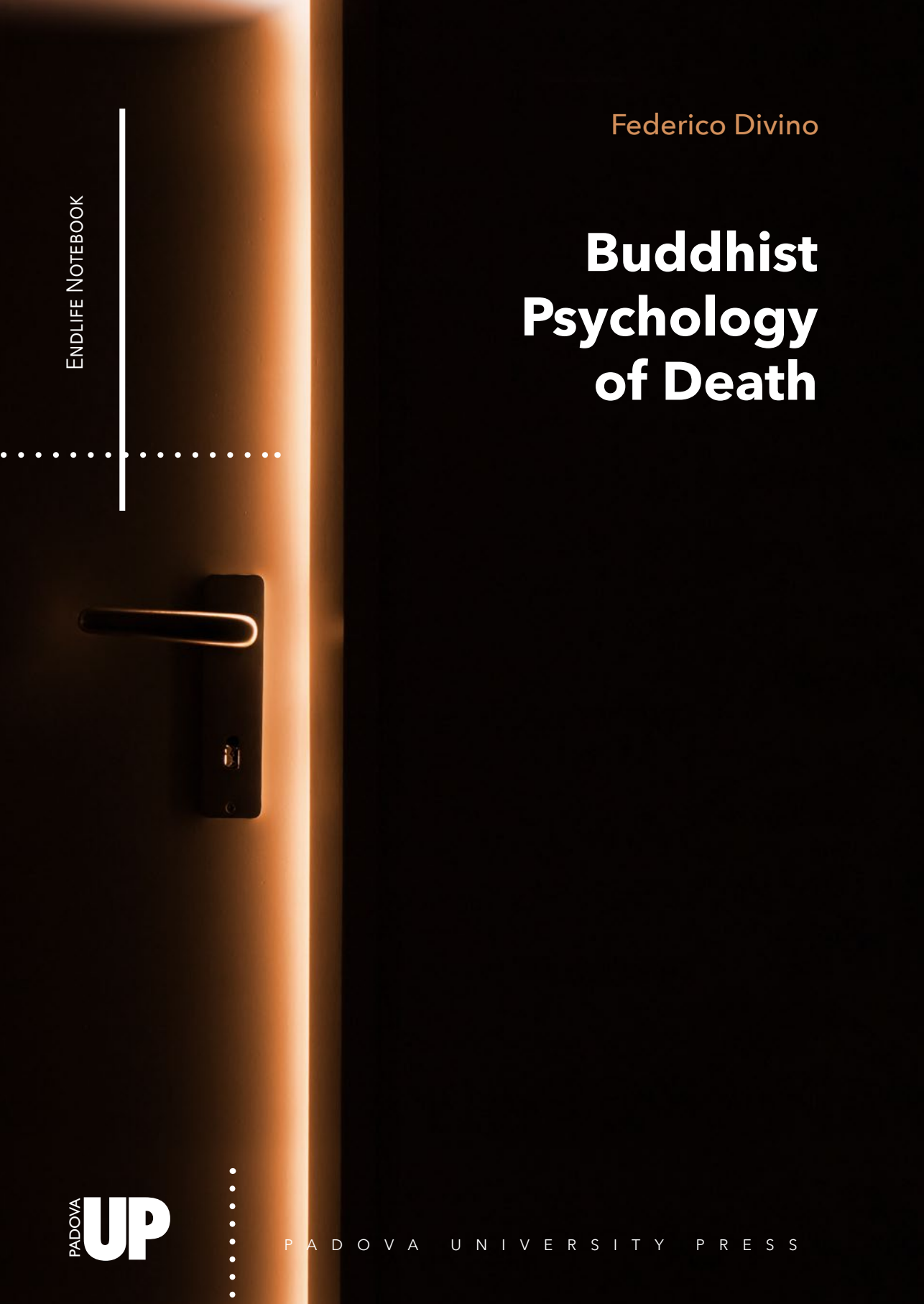

Endlife Notebook

Federico Divino

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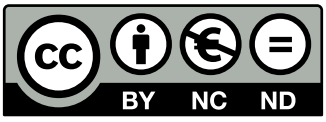

Collana Endlife NoteBook, ENB

Razionale

Endlife BookNotes, ENB, è una collana della Padova University Press che accoglie contributi italiani e internazionali, in una delle seguenti lingue: italiano, inglese, francese, tedesco e spagnolo. ENB affronta alcune delle questioni chiave che circondano le attuali discussioni intorno alla morte e al morire, utili per fornire spunti in grado di sviluppare la conoscenza in questo campo. La definizione di che cosa significhi morte è importante, e ENB dà ampio spazio a questo tema, ma è importante considerare anche altre questioni, ovvero quelle che derivano da tali punti di partenza e che delineano l'orizzonte più ampio di riferimento nella rappresentazione del senso del morire. Accogliendo argomenti che definiscono la morte nelle sue implicazioni filosofiche, psicologiche, antropologiche, culturali, mediche e religiose, ENB vuole aprire un'ampia discussione tra studiosi che lavorano in diverse discipline. La proposta è che gli specialisti discutano di queste tematiche partendo dalla loro peculiare prospettiva, ma sempre riconoscendo che l'interesse individuale e collettivo per la morte è funzione di un processo di costruzione culturale storicamente determinato. Alcuni dei problemi più significativi affrontati in contesti clinici, politici e formativi, come per esempio le decisioni terapeutiche, la morte e il valore della vita, i confini tra la vita e la morte, le varie forme di vita umana biologica che versa in uno stato di minima coscienza o in uno stato vegetativo permanente, sono sempre gestiti in modo differenziato nei diversi contesti culturali, in base al modo con cui sono rappresentati i rapporti tra vita e aldilà. ENB vuole dunque promuovere lo sviluppo di una coscienza sociale e interculturale su queste tematiche, per facilitare la formazione di un pensiero critico aperto, in grado di ridurre la generalizzata rimozione della morte e del morire negli scenari della contemporaneità.

Rationale

Endlife BookNotes, ENB, is a Padova University Press series that includes Italian and international contributions in one of the following languages: Italian, English, French, German and Spanish. ENB addresses some of the key issues surrounding the current discussions around death and dying, useful to provide insights to develop knowledge in this field. Whilst defining death is important, and ENB gives wide space to this theme, also other issues derived from the different definitions contribute to offer a wider horizon in the depiction of the sense of dying.

By accepting topics that define death according to philosophical, psychological, anthropological, cultural, medical and religious implications, ENB wants to open a wide discussion among scholars working in different disciplines. The proposal is that specialists discuss these issues starting from their peculiar perspective, but always recognizing that the individual and collective interest in death is a function of a cultural construction process, historically determined. Some of the most significant problems faced in clinical, political and educational contexts, such as therapeutic decisions, death and the value of life, the boundaries between life and death, the various forms of human biological life in a state of minimum consciousness or in a permanent vegetative state, are always handled differently in different cultural contexts, according to the way the relationship between life and afterlife is represented. ENB therefore wants to promote the development of a social and intercultural awareness on these issues, to facilitate the formation of an open and shared critical thinking reducing the wide spread contemporary removal of death and dying.

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Buddhist Psychology of Death

An Anthropological analysis of the Contemplative approach to the End of Life, Biopolitics and Thanatopower

Federico Divino

University of Padua, Department of Philosophy, Sociology, Education and Applied Psychology – Master in Death Studies & the end of life for the intervention of support and the accompanying.

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Abbreviations:

Snp	*Suttanipāta*
Dhp	*Dhammapadā*
Iti	*Itivuttaka*
Ud	*Udāna*
DN	*Dīghanikāya*
MN	*Majjhimanikāya*
SN	*Saṃyuttanikāya*
AN	*Aṅguttaranikāya*
MK	*Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*

Foreword – Deaths other than our own

Paolo S. H. Favero

In "The Unavouwable Community"[1] Maurice Blanchot speaks about death as the "true community of mortals". This community is universal, embracing all of "us", all of the human kind regardless of epochs, gender, ethnicity, class and so forth. This community is however also impossible, building as it does on the incapacity of human beings to consciously take part at it. So how can we approach, understand and describe, something that is so central to our being but that we can only experience in our absence?

This text enters this delicate yet fundamental terrain. Focusing on the Buddhist psychology and anthropology of death this is not merely an introduction to a different cultural model for understanding death (and life). Rather, it aims, by providing an alternative perspective on these themes, at shifting the very paradigm of death, immersing the readers in a different cultural world where our habitual perceptions are challenged. As I will discuss more in detail below, in times like these, surrounded as we are by wars, economical and environmental disasters we are somehow forced to engage an open dialogue with on death. This is not a need only for scholars involved in the growing field of thanatological studies or in other branches of science but also for all of us involved in the duty of living in this world. The following lines are the reflections of a visual anthropologist active on the study of contemporary metropolitan India on the value of a cross-cultural encounter with and on death across Western and Indian contexts. These reflections are based on my ethnographic research on what it means to 'live' death in a different manner. They start with a gaze onto (mainly but not only Western) modernity to then move on to the contemporary Indian context. Divino's work, that stretches itself not only across these situated contexts but also across epochs provides a perfect terrain for deepening such reflections.

So let me get back to the paradoxical nature of death. Death is, as I hinted at above, an experience that can be made only indirectly, in one's absence (or at least in the absence of the 'self' that we have acquainted ourselves with during life). Yet, it can be experienced through others, in proximity or in representation. As Georges Bataille suggested, when faced with someone's death "the living cannot but necessarily exist but outside of themselves"[2]. We therefore get in touch with death as image (I will get back to this aspect in a while). This is probably what has directed human beings over the millennia, in an attempt to grasp its meaning, to the realm of aesthetics, poetry and images. Images (no matter whether visual, mental or verbal) are fundamental tools for attending to experiences, narrations

1 M. BLANCHOT, *The Unavowable Community*, Station Hill Press (Barrytown 1988).

2 In Ibid., p. 6: "A being does not want to be recognized, it wants to be contested: in order to exist it goes towards the other, which contests and at times negates it […]. The existence of every being thus summons the other or a plurality of others".

and representations of the end of life. Supported by imagination and memory, they are the natural membrane connecting life and death. Keeping alive what has vanished, they open what Roland Barthes called the "punctum to the realm of the dead"[3]. They close the circuit between life and death images hence promoting a continuity between the extremes of human life.

The centrality of images in the human relation to death is also the expression of a critical dimension relating to the especially modern, Western and "hegemonic"[4] incapacity to deal with it[5]. For many inhabitants of the industrialized West (but also of the other parts of the world touched upon by global capitalism), visual media are today the only space where "viewers explore human mortality, challenge ideas and phobias about death, all while in a safe space"[6]. Like Kant's observer of the sublime, they regard it with a mixture of fear and awe, much as a mountaineer might view a raging avalanche from the safety of a mountain hut.

Absent in everyday life, death has in Western modernity been widely present in the media and the arts. This is particularly visible in the history of photography. Bazin suggested that at the origin of photography, the medium that embodies modernity, lies "a mummy complex"[7], an attempt to preserve "the continued existence of the corporeal body"[8]. Photography became also the preferred medium for giving subjects some form of immortality. A natural heir of the death-mask and of the silhouette, photography helped "keeping a lifelike image of the person in mind"[9]. With the invention of the camera this became the principal medium for dealing with the thin boundary that separates life from death. In and through an image. From that moment onwards, most human beings will be born and die to a photograph[10]. Yet, can there be other ways of addressing death? And possibly of befriending it?

This capitalist (largely Western but not only) hegemonic reluctance in facing, accepting and incorporating death into matters of life and hence of remanding it to the sphere of images and representations, is however, as preannounced, something relatively new. It was the modern consolidation of the belief in

3 Mirzoeff paraphrasing Barthes, cf. N. MIRZOEFF, *An Introduction to Visual Culture*, Psychology Press, Routledge (London 1999): p. 72.

4 A. GRAMSCI, *Selections from the prison Notebooks*, International Publishers (New York 1992).

5 I acknowledge the collaboration with Hannah Vercaeren in building up some of the following arguments regarding the invisibility of death in Western modernity.

6 R. PENFOLD-MOUNCE, *Corpses, popular culture and forensic Science: Public obsession with death*, "Mortality", 2015, 21.1, pp. 19-35: 3.

7 A. BAZIN, *The Ontology of the Photographic Image*, "Film Quarterly", 1960, 13.4, pp. 4-9: 3-4. DOI: 10.2307/1210183.

8 Ibid., p. 4.

9 R. HARRIS, *Photography and Death: Framing Death throughout History*, Emerald Publishing Limited (Leeds 2020): p. 37. DOI: 10.1108/9781839090455.

10 P. FAVERO, *It begins and it ends with an image: Reflections on Life/Death across Autobiography and Visual Culture*, "Anthropological Journal of European Cultures", 2022, 31.1, pp. 72-87. DOI: 10.3167/ajec.2022.310106.

rationality, productivity and science, that pushed death away from public view and into the realm of the hidden and the taboo[11]. With this passage death became also importantly associated to the loss of productivity, the key fundament of modern capitalist society. Along with aging, disease and disability it grew to become experienced as an obstacle to development and (paradoxically) to 'natural' productive cycle of life. Openly at odd with consumerism, the sick, the elderly and the dying have been progressively hidden from the public. Death has therefore mainly been approached through removal, in negation of something. It negates life, productivity, joy, eroticism. We do not allow it to be generative, to be the source of something new. We address it through metaphors of invisibility, of silence, and darkness.

The denial of death is so important that it can be viewed as "a significant trait of our culture"[12], almost like a flag of our way of living. And this is valid for the West but possibly also for large pockets of the world touched upon by global capitalism. Yet, it has not always been like this. Before the 20th century dying was normal, it was a visible public phenomenon. People normally died in the context of the home and in the company of family and close friends. In the old days, there was "hardly a room in which someone has not died"[13]. Death was also paraded through the streets with funerals that are now reserved only for statesmen and women. Yet, as Benjamin said, modernity made it "possible for people to avoid the sight of the dying"[14]. This was the birth of a new type of death heavily reliant on "medicalization" and "legalization"[15]. This distancing continues to rule the way death is handled in many parts of the world today.

Death is therefore a highly paradoxical, contradictory phenomenon. It is a "difficult"[16] subject that escapes most human attempts at rationalizing it. "Abstract and invisible"[17], it has, however, recently come back to the core of the lives of many "modern" world citizens. Think of the piles of coffins lined up by the military in churches and school gyms of Bergamo (Italy) at the height of the Covid-pandemic and the pyres of burning bodies in Delhi's parking lots; the corpses of civilians in Bucha and the images of migrants washed up on the shores of Italy. We watch flashing images of bombings with one eye, while keeping the other steadily fixed on our Instagram feed. We scroll past images of bodies pulled out of the rubble left

11 R. Harris, *Photography and Death*, cit. p. 3.

12 P. Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death: The Classic History of Western Attitudes Toward Death over The Last One Thousand Years*, Vintage Books (London 1981): p. 741.

13 W. Benjamin, *The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov*, Schocken Books (New York 1999): p. 93.

14 Ibidem.

15 P. Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death*, cit. p. 718.

16 Cf. S. Coleclough, *Difficult Death, Dying and the Dead in Media and Culture*, Palgrave Macmillan (Cham 2024). DOI: 10.1007/978-3-031-40732-1.

17 Cf. K. F. Durkin in C. D. Bryant & D. L. Peck, *Handbook of Death & Dying*, Sage (Thousand Oaks 2003): p. 43, chapter 5: *Death, Dying, and the Dead in Popular Culture*. DOI: 10.4135/9781412914291.

behind by yet another Israeli bomb strike to encounter yet another digital nomad's invitation to align our *chakras* in the search of enlightenment and wealth.

So, what is the effect of the overflow of images of death? Susan Sontag said that "being a spectator of calamities taking place in another country" has become "a quintessential modern experience"[18]. Starting from the 1930s photographic portrayals of wars, killings, famine, destruction and mass migrations images of death have in fact become so common that they may have inoculated us. Azoulay has spoken about the "fatigue"[19] caused by our involvement in what Fontcuberta called the "fury of images"[20]. Indeed, Susan Sontag was right when she stated that the act of looking at images of death has become part of the modern experience. However, she failed to mention that the images of death which we consume with such banality generally come from far away. They portray distant worlds, the worlds of 'the Other'; lives other than our own. But in our own world we do not show images of our dead ones. On television white blankets cover the images of dead (or seriously injured) victims of accidents, shootings etc. The doors of hospital departments are closed when a deceased patient has to be carried out. And children are protected from seeing the body of a dead relative the day before the funeral (even when that person was someone who held them in their arms as babies). Yet, these rules do not apply when it comes to the lives of others. So, we may indeed have a greater circulation of images of death than ever today, but these are always images portraying something out of reach, making death abstract and removed. And it is also easier than ever to look away from them too. They seem to simply wither away along the vertical fall of a scrolling gesture.

As this text is being written, the tsunami of images of dead children from Gaza, testimony of a brutality so far undocumented in human life is filling our visual landscape. Theodor Adorno famously wrote that "there can be no poetry after Auschwitz" (*Nach Auschwitz ein Gedicht zu schreiben, ist barbarisch*). So, what will be left (of us) after Gaza? The recent events in Palestine force us, more than ever, to reconsider the meaning that death, and its visible representations, have for many of us today. And they ask us to find novel ways of dealing with it, of making us sense a monstrosity that "seems to exceed any attempt to document it"[21].

In a world more prone than ever to manufacture its own destruction preparing oneself to die is no longer a mystical exercise but a mere necessity. Almost a basic need. Rather than looking away, or remove it in representation, we need to look right into death; we need to learn to deal with it. Addressing it as a certainty, as a true a pillar of our belonging to the community of mortals, death must be approached as a connecting experience that we must prepare ourselves for

18 S. SONTAG, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux (New York 2003): p. 19.

19 A. AZOULAY, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, Zone Books (New York 2008).

20 J. FONTCUBERTA, *La furia de las imágenes*, Galaxia Gutenberg (Barcelona 2016).

21 G. DIDI-HUBERMAN, *Images in Spite of All: Four Photographs from Auschwitz*, University of Chicago Press (Chicago 2003): p. 3.

experiencing in the most conscious of ways. This is what my friends and interlocutor Mr. Sid, a resident in one of Delhi's retirement homes and shelters in which I conduct my ethnographic research, once told me. "Death is the last great experience of my life, and I want to live to its fullest".

Like many of the subject that I have met during my research Mr. Sid co-exists with death, he accepts it, almost longs for it. Indeed, the senior citizens I encounter during my fieldwork must not be raised as symbols of some essentialized sense of Indianness. Nevertheless, they provide us with a window for thinking about death along a set of cultural categories that may freshen our approach to it. It forces us to question the key pillars along which death is approached, among them the very notions of life and what it means to be a human being.

Working with death in the context of a city like Delhi does in fact trigger off quite a few reflections. And even more so when you work together with human beings who live in places where death constitutes the only prospect for the future. Let us start with the city. Delhi's inhabitants (the *dillivāla*) co-exist with death. They do not make a fuzz about its evident presence. Death is a constitutive part of the everyday life of this city, and it reaches its inhabitants in a variety of (silent or loud) ways. It can be spotted in the shape of corpses of animals lying on a sidewalk, or in the eyes of the many homeless people sleeping on the side of a road. For the poor, Delhi is an eternal battleground. You just need to drive past the station at night and notice the number of humans struggling to survive until the day after. Death dances around these bodies and every now and then it takes one of them in her embrace. Yet death can also be loud, blatantly screened in the media. Images of found anonymous corpses awaiting identification decorate the pages of the newspapers. And indeed, in traditional settings the body of the death is displayed before cremation, paraded on the streets covered only by a thin white veil. White, the resulting amalgam of the fusions of all colors and the symbol of light, is the hue of death here. Yet, at the same time, death crawls also silently and viciously into the bodies of Delhi's inhabitants under the safe disguise of fresh air. Every day spent in this city shortens your life with one hour they say. The air is just as polluted as the water. Delhi is truly 'delhi-rious'. Like writer Kushwant Singh once wrote: "In Delhi, death and drink make life worth living". And indeed, India (and not just Delhi) offers a particularly interesting terrain for a scholar (especially an anthropologist) interested in death. Stereotypically this is a "spiritual" civilization that for a large part of its population also believes in reincarnation. Circularity and continuity (supposedly) characterize the Indian approach to death. This is what we generally believe, and this is what I am testing with my work.

In my fieldwork I have discovered how for most of my elder interlocutors, death and ageing are not particularly relevant subjects. They are just part of everyday life. They lovingly, compassionately co-live with it. The shelters and retirement homes that I have been working in are populated by subjects who expect their death at any time. These homes are emerging as a somewhat new part of the urban

landscape. In traditional India, the elderly are conventionally looked after in the safe premises of the extended family. Yet, with the transformations of a society marching towards becoming a permanent member of the club of most influential capitalist countries in the world, the organization of everyday life is changing. With flats becoming smaller and more expensive, with the cost of life growing, the extended family leave room for the nuclear one. And in response to this new, different types of structures are emerging to fill up the gaps of left open by this transformation. The institutions in which I have been conducting fieldwork are significantly different from each other. One is a middle/upper class residence for paying senior citizens, the second a smaller NGO-run shelter for 12-15 individuals in need of help; and the third a large shelter in the outskirts of Delhi with around 500 residents (with almost one person dying every day). Among the residents of these 3 homes, some young but most of them senior citizens, many have been rescued from the streets. Completely different in demographics these homes are united by the presence of human begins with similar destinies. The senior citizens I have met there have often been thrown out from their homes due to the death of a beloved one; due to economic difficulties, disability or simply ageing. This is the destiny of a man we will call Mr. Dutt, who was forced to move to a small flat that he eventually could no longer maintain after developing the first symptoms dementia. After the passing of his own wife his daughter in law saw no benefit in having the old man in the house any more. "I became a nuisance". The story of Mr. Sid is completely different as he chose to abandon his family in order not to become a burden for anyone. In the middle of the stage of life often referred to as that of the hermit[22], Mr. Sid entered his retirement home as a form of withdrawal from society preparing him for the last (spiritual) stage of his life. Both men have however something important in common. They have no fear of death. In all my exchanges with them on the subject they expressed in fact almost an attraction for it, a desire to explore what death actually means. And both expressed in conversation with me their wishes to be able to be present to that moment. Hoping suffering would not deprive them from being lucid at that particular moment. Mr. Dutt and Mr. Sid both accomplish the "being-towards-death" that makes up our lives. Appearing as provocations to the death anxiety that characterizes the lives of most inhabitants of the modern West, these men two men approach death directly and with a serenity that can alleviate the pain of many others. Doing so on the basis of a set of assumptions regarding the very meaning of being human that may on the surface conflict with the notions that inform neoliberal modernity, they signal the value of looking sideways, to other situated contexts for gaining inspiration.

These brief ethnographic insights may serve to create a frame around Divino's brief text. There he engages an anthropological reflection on death aiming to provoke a shift in how we typically reflect on the subject. Much of what I have

22 Cf. K. SINGH, *Delhi: A novel*, Penguin (New Delhi 1990).

introduced here relies on a conceptual platform that the reader will encounter in the following chapters. Divino offers an archaeological endeavor that seeks to explore the notions of death (and life) as first articulated by Indian Buddhist thinkers. Buddhism also proposes a concrete practice (meditation) aimed at transcending habitual conceptions, including the idea of death as well as experiences of the tremendous and the distressing that are at the center of many contemplative exercises. Ultimately, after having introduced us to different experiences and conceptions of the end-of-life, Divino will bring us back to an anthropological terrain, exploring the extent to which a Buddhist perspective may help us re-thinking, in line also with my musings above, our way of approaching death. Can cross cultural encounters, such as the one he suggests, help re-educating ourselves into a more serene co-habitation with death?

κινδυνεύουσι γὰρ ὅσοι τυγχάνουσιν ὀρθῶς ἁπτόμενοι φιλοσοφίας λεληθέναι τοὺς ἄλλους ὅτι οὐδὲν ἄλλο αὐτοὶ ἐπιτηδεύουσιν ἢ ἀποθνῄσκειν τε καὶ τεθνάναι

"All those who properly engage in the practice of philosophy are at risk of it going unnoticed by others that their true occupation is nothing other than the endeavor to die and to be dead".
(Plato, *Phaedo* 64a)

amataṃ te, bhikkhave, na paribhuñjanti ye kāyagatāsatiṃ na paribhuñjanti; amataṃ te, bhikkhave, paribhuñjanti ye kāyagatāsatiṃ paribhuñjanti

"O mendicants, those who do not enjoy mindfulness of the body, do not enjoy the deathless. Those who enjoy mindfulness of the body do enjoy deathlessness".
(AN 1.616)

1. Introduction

This research will be an investigation into an alternative cultural world where the conception of life and death varies considerably from the 'Western' perspective.

Certainly, as an anthropologist and a scholar of ethno-psychologies—psychological systems developed by other cultures, often examined from a comparative perspective—it would be more accurate to speak of an 'anthropology' of death. Indeed, the reader should not be misled by the term 'psychology' in the title. This work is, at best, one of ethno-psychology, an anthropology of death from which psychologists may also benefit, as our journey will frequently involve comparative analyses as well as attention to the archaeological aspects of Buddhist thought under examination. The conceptions of living and dying are not uniform across all cultures, and Buddhism in particular, with its contemplative practice and philosophical focus on themes of becoming and impermanence, offers us an excellent opportunity to broaden our horizons.

The psychology of death is a relatively new field that has emerged from thanatology studies and has gained significance with the recognition of correlations between cultural conceptions of death and psychological well-being. This psycho-thanatology has revealed profound connections between more spiritual aspects of living and the ability to confront death with greater serenity and less fear. However, these aspects have primarily focused on Christian religiosity, and only recently have they begun to explore the benefits that a state of mindfulness can bring to the approach to death. Specifically, near-death or pre-death experiences have led survivors to develop a heightened spiritual disposition, which these studies identify as a 'mindful' state. Having thus established this connection, it is our interest to investigate whether there are indeed reasons to believe that the meditative attitude in Buddhist thought arises as a counterbalance to the anxiety of the unknown in the face of death[23]. Drawing on the pioneering anthropological studies of Ernesto De Martino, also pioneering the development of ethnopsychiatry[24], the present study aims to investigate three aspects:

1. whether the Buddhist conception of death (*maraṇasaññā*) is, as psychological and anthropological studies suggest, an attempt to confront the nihilistic anxiety of the unknown;
2. how Buddhism develops its own psychological conception of death and becoming, the relationship with ideas such as *nibbāna*, and the ancient associations between

23 This work will focus mostly on ancient Buddhism codified in the Pāli canon and I will leave out other historical forms and other texts as the analysis we want to propose wants to focus on the first historically identifiable Buddhism.

24 P. Coppo, *Ethnopsychiatrie : la voie italienne*, "Annales Médico-psychologiques, revue psychiatrique", 2014, 172.1, pp. 56-59. DOI: 10.1016/j.amp.2013.11.012.

the figure of the Buddha and the epithet of the immortal (*amata*), thus outlining a Buddhist psychology concerning the problem of death;

3. to delineate the relationship between contemplative practice and the state of transcendence from worldly experience (*lokuttara*) and the conception of death, and to what extent Buddhism proposes to address the problem of death on a psychological level.

The discussion must commence with some foundational assumptions, which, although they may seem unnecessary, are important to reiterate insofar as the type of 'Buddhist psychology' under consideration here must account for a specific historical and cultural framework within the disciplines of psychology and Buddhist studies. The point here pertains to what is specifically meant by 'psychology'. Psychology in the strict sense was employed as part of the philosophical lexicon and within that branch of philosophy concerned with the study of human mental processes. From this strictly logical perspective, it cannot be denied that if figures such as Brentano, Kant, or Descartes can also be regarded as 'psychologists', there is no doubt that the sophisticated reflections on cognitive processes, the problem of perception, and the dynamics by which humans develop attachment and suffering that have been meticulously described in Pāli Buddhism should equally be considered 'psychological' aspects of ancient Buddhism[25]. From this perspective, the matter is indeed beyond doubt: it is now a well-established and widely accepted fact among scholars that Buddhism can be understood as (but not limited to) a form of psychology[26].

However, there is also the specialization of psychology as a scientific and quantitative discipline, and it is to this branch that clinical practices, which form the foundation of psychotherapy, have aligned themselves. This branch also incorporates Buddhism into its ranks, primarily in terms of clinical psychology, as mindfulness has officially assumed the role of therapy in our modern world. Although it is not equivalent to Buddhist contemplative practice and is more of a transcultural form, meaning transformed and adapted to the needs of modern culture and the paradigms of biomedicine and cognitive-behavioral psychology, it still maintains a certain aura of exogenous spirituality, an exotic charm that attracts many to this practice. Personally, I am highly critical of this discipline, which is becoming increasingly 'purified' of the philosophical elements necessary for a good Buddhist contemplative practice and is being made more and more protocol-based and standardized along the lines of psychotherapy[27]. This gradual

25 R. Johansson, *The Dynamic Psychology of Early Buddhism*, Curzon Press ("Scandinavian Institute of Asian Studies Monograph Series", 37, London 1979).

26 P. De Silva, *An Introduction to Buddhist Psychology*, Palgrave Macmillan (London 2005). DOI: 10.1057/9780230509450.

27 R. H. Sharf, *Is mindfulness Buddhist? (and why it matters)*, "Transcultural Psychiatry", 2014, 52.4, pp. 470-484. DOI: 10.1177/1363461514557561.

process of medicalization then intertwines with the commodification of the 'tool' of mindfulness, which tends to make it more and more a consumable product[28].

With these necessary critiques in mind, it is essential to recognize that this work will primarily focus on the first aspect of psychology, namely, that which pertains to the study and analysis of human mental processes and, specifically, that which pertains to the concept of death from the perspective of Buddhism. Naturally, to avoid disemboweling Buddhism from its context, it is not possible to force an exclusively analytical psychological interpretation, and I will not disregard the more philosophical aspects that such conceptions imply. The second psychological aspect, related to therapy and quantitative studies, will assist us in defining how Buddhist psychology can intervene in our modernity, coming to the aid of a problem concerning the fear of death, which has already partly turned to mindfulness as a support mechanism but could further expand these already established benefits based on a deeper understanding of Buddhist psychological thought tout-court.

As previously mentioned, the field of psycho-thanatology is relatively young but is rapidly gaining consensus due to its exploration of elements related to well-being and the ability to cope with the anxiety of death. This is particularly relevant in the context of providing assistance to individuals suffering from chronic illnesses. It has been observed that spirituality plays a significant role in one's ability to confront this specific condition, and the "Functional Assessment of Chronic Illness Therapy-Spiritual Well-Being Scale", adopted by researchers, serves as evidence of its significance, demonstrating that "domains of spirituality/religiosity are associated with the quality of life (QoL) of people with chronic disease"[29]. These aspects have also been linked to a more general issue, which is the perception of "meaning" in one's life. Religion or spirituality fills the void left by the materialistic worldview, which does not provide a sense of life's purpose, thus approaching death with nihilistic dread. This aspect, referred to as "death anxiety", negatively affects not only an individual's approach to death but also their overall quality of life. It is interesting to note that "Near-Death Experiences" (NDEs) can significantly alter the nihilistic perspective and provide individuals who have experienced NDEs with a heightened sense of the meaning of their lives. It has also been recognized that the perception of life following an NDE is comparable to that which a meditator develops, establishing a correlation

28 M. Karjalainen, G. Islam, & M. Holm, *Scientization, instrumentalization, and commodification of mindfulness in a professional services firm*, "Organization", 2021, 28.3, pp. 483–509. DOI: 10.1177/1350508419883388.

29 I. Testoni, G. Sansonetto, L. Ronconi, M. Rodelli, G. Baracco & L. Grassi, *Meaning of life, representation of death, and their association with psychological distress*, "Palliative & Supportive Care", 2017, 16.5, pp. 511-519: 512. DOI: 10.1017/S1478951517000669.

with the state of mindfulness[30]. This leads us to pose some questions. In ancient Buddhism, *nibbana*, the ultimate liberation from suffering, is often linked to death but is not equated with it. There is a resemblance that can be misleading, but it is difficult to determine to what extent *nibbāna* serves as a palliative remedy against the fear of death or whether it represents the transcendence of the concept of death itself, as in other contexts, the Buddha is referred to as immortal (*amata*).

Certainly, the state of supreme tranquility and bliss achieved as one approaches *nibbāna* seems to echo the experiences of NDEs. Similarly, there are notable similarities between NDEs and the phenomenology of individuals who reach deep states of meditation and experience a state of "expanded consciousness" or even "Out-of-Body Experiences" (OOBEs). Regarding NDEs, we observe the following: "awareness of being dead during the experience, pleasant feelings, out-of-body experiences, perceptions of a warm and bright light, encounters with deceased people or other beings, and the sight of a heavenly or hellish landscape", as well as "alterations in self-perceptions; increased empathy toward and acceptance of others; and different attitudes toward life and death characterized by increased interest in understanding themselves and others, and the meaning of life"[31]. The question we can pose is whether there is a stage in Buddhist contemplative practice, such as *samādhi* or one of the *jhāna*s, that corresponds to a kind of 'fake-death' or NDE. In the earlier stages of the canon, contemplative practice (*bhāvanā*) is associated with five main aspects: cognition (*citta*), corporeality (*kāya*), compassion (*mettā*), wisdom (*paññā*), and unification (*samādhi*) or concentration toward non-duality. Only later do techniques of meditative concentration on tranquility (*samatha*) and insight (*vipassanā*) emerge. However, there are sections of the canon that clearly describe contemplative practices that reflect on challenging aspects such as the dismemberment of the body or the perception of disgust, focusing on one's own entrails, impurity, and what is normally repelled. These meditations are significant because they provide a clear understanding of the Buddhist attitude towards death. Additionally, it should not be forgotten that this approach to death is approached from what can be termed a psychological perspective. Every theme in Buddhist contemplation is always proposed with analytical intent: when meditating on cognition or corporeality, it is also done to deconstruct our erroneous image of them and to reveal something more complex that we tend to underestimate.

Another aspect noted by Bianco et al. is that "after experiencing an NDE, many people seem relatively unconcerned about their social status and become less

30 W. Van Gordon, E. Shonin, T. J. Dunn, D. Sheffield, J. Garcia-Campayo, M. D. Griffiths, *Meditation-Induced Near-Death Experiences: a 3-Year Longitudinal Study*, "Mindfulness", 2018, 9.6, pp. 1794-1806. DOI: 10.1007/s12671-018-0922-3.

31 S. Bianco, I. Testoni, A. Palmieri, S. Solomon & J. Hart, *The Psychological Correlates of Decreased Death Anxiety After a Near-Death Experience: The Role of Self-Esteem, Mindfulness, and Death Representations*. "Journal of Humanistic Psychology", 2019, pp. 1-24: 3. DOI: 10.1177/0022167819892107.

devoted to material gain. [...] This approach toward life seems to reflect heightened mindfulness, which has been conceptualized as including the capacity to direct attention on thoughts, feelings, physical sensations, and other stimuli occurring in the present moment"[32]. Here, it is unnecessary to point out the obvious connection that can be made with the state of *mettā* and the importance that Buddhist practice places on the non-judgmental mental state and love for all sentient beings, as well as the relationship with the ascetic lifestyle of the early Buddhist *samaṇas*, who were encouraged to abandon the city for a more restrained lifestyle without excess and opulence, in other words, without attachment to ephemeral and impermanent possessions. However, these achievements in Buddhism are not attained through an excessive focus on the present moment, but rather through acquiring a form of awareness of the ontological nature of reality and the cognitive deceptions that distort our psychology and lead us to attach to impermanent phenomena or perceive things as they are not. The emphasis on the here and now (*hic et nunc*) seems to be more of a distortion of modern mindfulness, as clearly demonstrated by Purser[33]. Nevertheless, even this form of concentration on the present moment, which Buddhism does not emphasize but is rather a part of the preliminary stages of contemplative practice, is still a positive aspect and also related to NDE experiences.

> Trait mindfulness involves an enhanced receptivity to internal and external stimuli as they occur, and is negatively correlated with neuroticism and positively correlated with self-esteem [...]. An NDE may foster greater mindfulness, and a radical focus on the present may in turn produce a reduction of death anxiety [...] high levels of mindfulness reduced defensive reactions to death reminders.[34]

The recently developed "Testoni Death Representation Scale" (TDRS) also emerges to account for the philosophical and existential dimensions, including the spiritual aspects, in the approach to the fear of death. It represents a psychological investigative scale that effectively illustrates the central point of our hypothesis, namely, that "it is different to believe that death is absolute annihilation than to be sure that it is a passage or a transformation of one's own personal identity. The hypothetical difference is that there is a greater suffering caused by the former idea"[35].

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32 S. Bianco et al., *The Psychological Correlates...*, cit. pp. 5-6.

33 R. Purser, *The Myth of the Present Moment*, "Mindfulness", 2015, 6, pp. 680–686. DOI: 10.1007/s12671-014-0333-z.

34 S. Bianco, et al., *The Psychological Correlates...*, cit. p. 6.

35 I. Testoni, D. Ancona & L. Ronconi, *The Ontological Representation of Death: A Scale to Measure the Idea of Annihilation Versus Passage*, "OMEGA – Journal of Death and Dying", 2015, 71.1, pp. 60–81: 71. DOI: 10.1177/0030222814568289.

The Buddhist tradition rejects nihilistic positions from the very inception of its philosophical underpinnings[36], and the psychology it delineates is imbued with a profound anti-dualism that categorically rejects nihilism as a possibility. However, when we delve into the theme of death, it is imperative to exercise caution in not misconstruing Buddhism as a mere promise of salvation or redemption, akin to the Christian religious framework. This misinterpretation has also ensnared many Western commentators.

Testoni aptly acknowledges that Western thought has primarily evolved along dualistic lines, which, in the context of death, manifests as only two conceivable interpretations: either it constitutes absolute annihilation (a materialistic standpoint) or it signifies a transition to another realm (a spiritualistic perspective). This dualistic framework also underpins the metaphysical structure postulated by Emanuele Severino, which, through its logical reasoning (either A or B), establishes a system of knowledge (epistemology) that diverges from the realm of myth.

Testoni characterizes the Western psychological model as grounded in a tripartite logical principle. Interestingly, it can be posited that Buddhism, on the contrary, relies on a quadripartite logic, which is an application of its profound non-dualism. Let us proceed step by step. Western tripartite psychology can be succinctly summarized by three fundamental logical principles[37]:

1. Identity $[\forall x, (x = x)]$ every being is identical to itself;
2. Non-Contradiction $[\sim\exists(p \wedge \sim p)]$ something cannot be other than itself;
3. The Excluded Third $[p \vee \sim p]$ either something or its opposite must be true, not both.

In the Buddhist psychological framework, the discourse concerning the development of identity through the conglomeration of the five psychophysical elements (*pañcupādānakkhandhā*) also implies that the formed identity is convinced of its self-essence (*sabhāva*), that is, its independence. If indeed the psychophysical identity were to recognize its impermanence, it would fall into crisis and would be unable to function in the world. The identity must conceive of itself as independent, contrary to the truth of things, which is the mutual interdependence of all entities, i.e., the impossibility for any aspect of being to exist independently of all other possible aspects of being. The aporia of identity is a phenomenon perfectly elucidated by Nāgārjuna; however, it should be noted that Nāgārjuna's psychology of identity is nothing more than a logical formalization of what has already been presented in the Pāli canon. Nāgārjuna delineates the

36 F. Divino, *Dualism and Psychosemantics: Holography and Pansematism in Early Buddhist Philosophy*. "Comparative Philosophy", 2023, 14.2, pp. 1-40: 16-7, note 13. DOI: 10.31979/2151-6014(2023).140204.

37 This resulting scheme is outlined starting from that described in I. Testoni et al., *The Ontological Representation of Death*, cit. p. 64.

fundaments of the aporia of identity in a fourfold negation, four principles (*catuṣkoṭi*)[38], instead of the three we have just seen. For instance, is negated (*pratiṣedha*) that:

1. The self exists [~A]
2. The self doesn't exist [~ (~A)]
3. The self exists and doesn't exist at the same time [~ (A ʌ ~A)]
4. The self could be either existent or nonexistent [~ (A v ~A)]

These four positions have been rigorously analyzed from a logical and philosophical standpoint in a prior scholarly work[39]. Nonetheless, in the present context, our primary objective is to ascertain their implications in shaping the psychology of death within the framework of Buddhism. It is noteworthy that, in this regard, how the origin of the *catuṣkoṭi* can be traced back to a model of fourfold negation, or more precisely, refrain from responding (*avyākata*) regarding the nature of the world by the Buddha. Indeed, in the discourse found in MN 63, we encounter the following passage:

> Māluṅkyaputta, it's not the case that when there is the view, 'the world is finite', there would be the living of the spiritual life. And it's not the case that when there is the view, 'the world is infinite', there is the living of the spiritual life. When there is the view, 'the world is finite', and when there is the view, 'the world is infinite', there is still the birth, there is the aging, there is the death, there is the sorrow, lamentation, pain, despair, and distress whose destruction I make known right in the here and now.[40]

Let us pay attention to the lexicon. The terms "finite" and "infinite" referred to the world are expressed with the words *antavā* and *anantavā loko*. In the previous paragraph the same refrain is reported, simply changing the wording to *sassato* and *asassato loko*, as the same question was posed about eternity of the world. Subsequently, the text continues with questions posed in the same way but referring to the self and its identity or difference from the body, and finally to the existence or not of the Buddha after death. We are not interested in this problem now as we must focus on the use of the term *loko*. Of course, it is clear that the idea of *sassato* (eternity) is in some way similar to that of infinity (*anantavā*) as the latter is not understood in a mathematical sense (the boundless/limitless world),

38 It should be noted that although Nāgārjuna uses this type of logic, the term *catuṣkoṭi* as well as that of the related literature (*catuṣkoṭikā*) is subsequent, starting with Āryadeva and Candrakīrti.

39 F. DIVINO, *Dualism and Psychosemantics*, cit. pp. 28-9.

40 Original: *antavā loko ti, mālukyaputta, diṭṭhiyā sati brahmacariyavāso abhavissāti, evaṃ no. anantavā loko ti, mālukyaputta, diṭṭhiyā sati brahmacariyavāso abhavissāti, evampi no. antavā loko ti vā, mālukyaputta, diṭṭhiyā sati, anantavā loko ti vā diṭṭhiyā sati attheva jāti, atthi jarā, atthi maraṇaṃ, santi sokaparidevadukkhadomanassupāyāsā; yesāhaṃ diṭṭheva dhamme nighātaṃ paññapemi.*

but rather as persistence (the world that 'is not' comes to the end of its existence). The dictionary of the Pāli Text Society at the entry *antavā* reports "having an end, finite" as it is composed of *anta* + *vant*. The term *anta* as meaning "end" is also found in the expression *lokanta* (literally *loka-anta* that is "the end of the world") as a synonym of *lokassa aṭṭhaṅgamo*[41]. It is also said that the wise ascetics abandons the world (*nīyanti dhīrā lokamhā*) because he has defeated Death (Dhp 175).

Then, if we examine the four possibilities asked to the Buddha in MN 63 we can draw the general rule of the fourfold negation:

Is the world (w)…

1. …eternal? $\forall w \exists(x)$
2. …or not? $\forall w \exists(\sim x)$
3. …or both? $\forall w \exists(x \wedge \sim x)$
4. …or neither? $\forall w \sim\exists(x \wedge \sim x)$

It follows therefore that in this context the Buddha denies both that the world is everlasting (*anantavā*) or that is annihilable (*antavā*). This would apparently contradict a whole series of other suttas that I will analyze here which, on the model of the *lokasutta*, affirm that it is possible to reach an "end of the world" (*lokanta*)[42]. In the first case we speak of the conception of nominal entities (defining the world 'as' eternal or non-eternal), while in the second case we speak precisely of what constitutes the world that allows nominal definitions, and how this can be deconstructed. With strong words, the Buddha announces this truth in the sutta about the world: *lokassa, bhikkhave, samudayañca atthaṅgamañca desessāmi*, "about the world, mendicants, I will teach you the origin and the end" (SN 35.107).

Can we establish a correlation between the "end of the world" as mentioned by the Buddha and the fear of death? In a prior study in which I engaged in a comprehensive analysis of the concept of the end of the world in Buddhism[43], I concluded that the description of the "world" in their terms is a psychological phenomenon, pertaining to the way our minds conceive the organization of events through a "worldly" order (*lokiya*). While the Buddha pursues the transcendent

41 Cf. also F. Divino, *In this world or the next: investigation over the "End of the World" in contemplative practice through the Pāli canon*, "Annali Sezione Orientale", 2023, 83.1-2, pp. 99-129. DOI: 10.1163/24685631-12340142.

42 The reason why our thinking oscillates between two options that are both absurd, that is, that the world exists or that it does not exist, between existentialist extremism and nihilistic extremism, is a fact rooted in human psychology, and this is what meditation wants precisely eliminate through the "end of the world". We will see how this dualistic conception oscillating between two options, both false, is addressed on the level of meditation by Buddhist psychology.

43 F. Divino, *In this world or the next.*

order (*lokuttara*), which is the end of the world (*lokanta*), there is no reason to believe that death is in any way a transcendence from the world. On the contrary, it seems that death is rather included within the worldly order, which is founded on the principle of radical dualism: things are either A or B, and they are organized through antinomies, in mutual oppositions that form a coherent order within a system. However, the world is precisely this, a psychological system, and therefore it is "founded" by the mind and can be "destroyed" through meditation. The destruction of the world in no way implies an annihilation of being, but I will also come to this fundamental aspect. If death is to be placed within the world-system, establishing a dualism with life, could the transcendence from the duality that Buddhism seeks be a solution to the psychological problem of death? Furthermore, can we say that, for Buddhism, death is a psychologically-rooted issue?

Regarding mindfulness meditation specifically, numerous studies already attest to its benefits in mitigating the fear of mortality and improving one's relationship with the concept of death. It must be noted, however, that mindfulness, as shaped by Western psychological epistemology in the form of cognitive-behavioral theory, represents a transformation of the Buddhist contemplative practice. This transformation has led to significant reinterpretations and, in many cases, a focus solely on the theme of presence at the expense of a broader context related to Buddhist philosophical thought and its meditation practices. My intention is to account for both perspectives, and it must be stated that mindfulness, without a doubt, presents benefits in the context of death anxiety. A recent study "investigated the effects of brief mindfulness and contemplative practices completed over 6 weeks on the fear of death and dying. The results demonstrated that both mindfulness and contemplative practices significantly reduced fear of oneself dying and fear of the death of others"[44].

Not only mindfulness, but Buddhist thought in general has proven beneficial in cultivating forms of conscious spirituality capable of addressing the theme of death with greater strength. This is attributable to the unique nature of Buddhist philosophy and its approach to the themes of life and death. The enormous potential of Buddhist teachings has been recognized for their benefit in palliative care[45].

44 B. ANĀLAYO, O. N. MEDVEDEV, N. N. SINGH, et al. *Effects of Mindful Practices on Terror of Mortality: A Randomized Controlled Trial*, "Mindfulness", 2022, 13, pp. 3043–3057, cit. p. 5052. DOI: 10.1007/s12671-022-01967-83052.

45 Cf. E. K. MASEL, S. SCHUR, AND H. H. WATZKE, *Life is Uncertain. Death is Certain. Buddhism and Palliative Care*, "Journal of Pain and Symptom Management", 2012, 44.2, pp. 307-312. DOI: 10.1016/j.jpainsymman.2012.02.018.

2. Cessation of 'presence' and the Experience of Death

The aim of this brief monograph is also to engage in a reflection on the concept of death, re-evaluating it from a different epistemological perspective, such as that offered by Buddhist thought. From this viewpoint, however, it is crucial that we critically examine our own starting epistemological framework, as it would be impossible to re-evaluate our understanding of death without first recognizing the framework within which we ourselves are embedded. In this regard, I believe the most appropriate point of departure is offered by the French philologist and philosopher Pierre Hadot, who, more than others, has succeeded in challenging our assumptions about this subject, providing a valuable archaeology of the concept of death in the Western tradition[46].

From an etymological standpoint, given that we are navigating within the Indian world, which belongs to the Indo-European linguistic family, there are two principal terms that convey the notion of death. One is expressed by the reconstructed Indo-European root **mer-*, which I will further analyze later. This root underlies the ancient Indian term *márati*, meaning "to die" or "to perish", which is also found in the Pāli verb *marati* with the same meaning. The root **mr̥-*/**mer-*, however, has a reconstructed meaning of "to disappear"[47]. The notion of death as *disappearance* is a metaphor still in use today, and it is perhaps for this reason that the original meaning of "disappear" was extended to encompass death. We will see that Pāli Buddhism engages deeply with the concept of death, primarily as an idea and as a concept juxtaposed with life, and this antinomy will serve as the basis for philosophical reflections on death as a notion, rather than as an insurmountable law. The Buddha is often described as *amata*, or "deathless", and this concept, constructed as a negation of death (*a-mr̥-ta*), is paralleled in the Greek term ἄμβροτος (with the β being the result of a proto-Greek epenthesis from **ámrətos*, identical to the Indian *amr̥ta*)[48]. However, the Greek world conceives of death in other ways as well.

Our conception of death and mortality, which derives from the Greek tradition, also employs another term: θάνατος. Human beings are frequently described as "mortal" using precisely this term, whose origin traces back to θνήσκω.

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46 Cf. P. Hadot, *Le Voile d'Isis: Essai sur l'histoire de nature*, Gallimard (Paris 2008).

47 Cf. M. de Vaan (ed.), *Etymological Dictionary of Latin and other Italic Languages*, Brill (Leiden 2008). Part of Lubotsky, Alexander (ed.), *Leiden Indo-European Etymological Dictionary Series*, Volume 7. https://brill.com/view/title/12612. ARK: ark:/13960/t0wq8pk7d. Entry: Pit ****morje***- 'to die' (p. 390). The reconstructed Proto-Indo-European root is "*mer-/*mr-, … 'to make disappear'; Skt. pr. *mriyáte* (< **mr-ie-*)". See also Sir Monier Monier-Williams (ed.) *A Dictionary English and Sanskrit*, Clarendon Press (Oxford 1899). Entry: मृ and मृत्यु (p. 827).

48 Cf. R. Beekes & L. van Beek (ed.), *Etymological Dictionary of Greek* (2 volumes), Brill (Leiden 2010). Part of Lubotsky, Alexander (ed.), *Leiden Indo-European Etymological Dictionary Series*, Volume 10. https://brill.com/view/title/17726. ARK: ark:/13960/s20qzwvv9vf. Entry: **βροτός** (pp. 242-3).

Nevertheless, it is intriguing to observe that even this second conception of death carries a meaning virtually identical to the previous one: one line of etymological interpretation connects it to the Sanskrit *ádhvanīt*, meaning "he disappeared", and to the root *dhvāntá*, meaning "darkness". However, there is no universal agreement on this interpretation. Beekes' etymological dictionary expresses some doubts regarding the certainty of this root's reconstruction[49]. This, however, is not the critical point: the reconstructed meaning of a term, in itself, would not prove anything. It is thus more pertinent to examine the actual usage of the term, or other terms that describe the same concept.

To reassess the concept of 'death', we must first understand the origins of our modern conception of life as well. If indeed death is the absolute negation of life, then what is 'life' in the first place? Life (βίος) is, in the Western tradition, inextricably linked to the idea of nature (φύσις). Both of these concepts, which began to be elaborated in Greek thought, have Indo-European origins and can also be found in cognate terms in Indian lexicons (see below). However, a terminological kinship does not necessarily imply the development of analogous conceptions in different intellectual traditions. Therefore, we must give primary attention to texts, in addition to the words themselves.

Nature (φύσις) can today be understood in two distinct ways. It can refer to a set of laws that describe the behavior of animate or inanimate things, where biological laws describe the behavior of living organisms and are merely extensions of the physical laws that focus on the behavior of all objects, including non-biological ones. Alternatively, an analogous but not entirely identical conception holds that nature is a set of tendencies that are predominant in the things of the world. This more phenomenological description emphasizes the relationality between things in the world, with φύσις being the specific behavior governing the relationship between these things[50].

For instance, imagine entity A and entity B placed in a relationship. Phenomenological observation tells us that when A and B are related, they exhibit a specific behavior, such that A is attracted to B. This does not occur, for example, when A is related to C. This is analogous to the relationship between a piece of metal (A) and a magnet (B), and a preliminary phenomenological attempt to describe this relationship could be that the φύσις of object B includes the property of attracting object A. In this descriptive model, where the emphasis is placed on the relationship rather than on presumed external laws, life is conceived similarly.

This conception, as Pierre Hadot argues, is evident in early Greek thinkers such as Heraclitus, and, through reinterpretations and misreadings of their texts, it

49 Cf. Ibid., entry: θάνατος (pp. 533-4).

50 I must express my gratitude to the esteemed colleague, Stefan Klemczak, for bringing to my attention the theme of ancient conceptions of nature and life in the work of Hadot, and for the extended philosophical discussions we have shared, which have enriched me and laid the foundation for this discourse.

eventually transformed into our modern conception of nature. As demonstrated in Hadot's remarkable work, the interpretation of the famous Heraclitean fragment DK B123[51], which states that nature "loves to hide", is entirely misleading. In Heraclitus, as in other early Greek thinkers, the term φύσις refers to the predominant tendency in the behavior of a given object under observation. Just as the breeze "prefers" to blow from cold rather than warm places, nature "prefers" to conceal itself. This is indeed the most authentic sense of the verb κρύπτεσθαι, which, for Hadot, carries a clear allegorical meaning in reference to death: "le mot *phusis* pouvait désigner la naissance, le mot *kruptesthai*, de son côté, pouvait évoquer la disparition, la mort"[52].

The statement φύσις κρύπτεσθαι φιλεῖ should therefore be understood primarily in the context of the relationship between φύσις and κρύπτω, which is a processual relationship: A ⟶ B. The term φύσις refers to what appears, and the verb φύω, meaning "to grow", is often associated with plants. A seed is planted in the earth, hidden, but when the plant begins to grow, it reveals itself, emerging from the soil where it was once concealed in potential. This is a *phenomenological* process, wherein the processual unfolding of φύω ⟶ κρύπτω describes the two discrete elements of a cycle: appearance and disappearance, or, allegorically, birth and death. What appears subsequently leads to disappearance, only for something new to appear in its place. This processuality is what is captured in the phrase φύσις κρύπτεσθαι φιλεῖ, which does not imply that nature "loves" concealment.

Nevertheless, a series of reinterpretations and misreadings of this allegory[53] have led to an entirely different understanding of the concept of nature, and consequently, of life itself. Heraclitus makes explicit this connection between life and death as a processual relation: βιός τῷ τόξῳ ὄνομα βίος ἔργον δὲ θάνατος (DK B48). In this fragment, the homophony between "bow" (βιός) and "life" (βίος) is used to convey a metaphorical interpretation: "the name of the bow is 'life', though its deed is death". Hadot remarks again the processual nature of this relation, where ἔργον, the outcome of the work of the bow, can be interpreted as our arrow (⟶) in the formula above: the name of βιός is βίος, but its ἔργον is θάνατος. That is,

$$\text{βίος} \overset{\text{ἔργον}}{\longrightarrow} \text{θάνατος} = \text{φύω} \overset{\text{φιλεῖ}}{\longrightarrow} \text{κρύπτω}$$

We can understand this formula also as a phenomenological principle: a cycle that describes every phenomenon we testify as a relationship between two fundamental phases: *Appearing* ⟶ *Disappearing*. Thus, according to Hadot, this original understanding of nature was also the "étonnement devant le mystère de

51 Heraclitus, fragments, Diels-Kranz system.
52 Cf. P. Hadot, *Le Voile d'Isis*, cit. p. 29.
53 Ibid., pp. 72-8.

la métamorphose, de l'identité profonde de la vie et de la mort. Comment se fait-il que les choses se forment pour disparaître ? Comment se fait-il que ce soit à l'intérieur de chaque chose que le processus de production soit indissolublement processus de destruction, que le mouvement même de la vie soit le mouvement même de la mort, la disparition apparaissant ainsi comme une nécessité inscrite dans l'apparition"[54].

The concept of φύσις reveals a phenomenological root, as the etymology of this term is originally understood as "that which grows" (φύω) and, consequently, "that which appears". In addition to growth, the verb φύω also denotes production, but the reconstructed Indo-European root *b^huH- specifically means "to appear"[55], a meaning that is also preserved in the verb φύομαι.

The idea of death as the ultimate annihilation is a subsequent development that, according to Severino, is part of the history of the forgetfulness of the true sense of being in the history of Western thought. Death as a 'total annihilation' is maintained and preserved by cultural forms that structure themselves, especially as systems of power and management of communities. Positioning themselves as protectors of these faithful communities against the threat of annihilation was functional to presenting an even stronger message of salvation. Thus, death is partly opposed, but partly preserved because it must serve as a lever—a constant threat from which the power structure protects the faithful. In exchange for protection from death, which could be a guarantee of life beyond death or even a total victory over death itself, the apparatus demands subservience, loyalty, and faith, adherence to a system of norms and social order that could not be justified without this threat. Death thus serves as a catalyzing force, pushing communities to unite under a system that, with the promise of salvation from 'death', establishes an order on 'life' and manages the 'lives', i.e., the social bodies adhering to that system, with an economic, managerial, and political organization.

To achieve this, the concept of 'life' as something 'endowed with value' must be established, and the power of these systems is based on the ability to attribute or withhold value from 'life'. For the idea of 'life' to which value can be attributed as a reward to social bodies adhering to such a conception of vitality to exist, its antithesis, 'death', must also be founded. What distinctly sets Buddhist thought apart in the landscape of many other South Asian religions and beyond is its rejection of this life-death dichotomy, justified by the refusal to adhere to that system of power and 'economic' management of living bodies valued and subjected by an apparatus. The defeat of death is a transcendence that goes beyond life, as the two concepts only exist together as antinomies. Together they stand, and together they fall. The immortality attained by the meditator involves a progressive deconstruction of the beliefs about 'life' and 'death' as conventional,

54 Ibid., p. 33.

55 Cf. R. Beekes & L. van Beek, *Etymological Dictionary of Greek*, pp. 1597–98.

arbitrary designations that do not describe the truth according to Buddhists. What the meditator seeks is beyond life and death.

The Buddha's teachings are often referred to as teachings on liberation from death or the state of deathlessness (*desentaṃ amataṃ padaṃ*, AN 4.48). It is crucial to understand specifically what is being referred to here. The symbolic device of death has been a contentious subject for philosophical and religious thoughts for centuries, often used as a pretext to convey a superior doctrine or to undermine opposing doctrines. What must be clear is that death is only seemingly opposed as an enemy by many of these ideologies.

This also substantiates the fundamental difference between the emerging post-Vedic orthodoxy taking shape at the time of the Buddha and ascetic thought itself. Strengthened by the Vedas, the Brahmanism forming at the time aimed to achieve a state of "immortality" (*amṛta*) analogous to that described in the Vedas: through the consumption of a sacred drink, acquiring a status similar to that of the divine. For instance, Ṛgveda 8.48.3 states: "we drink the Soma, may thus we become immortal! We attained the light, we have known the gods! What could ever do the enemy to us now? What hostility could ever the perishable man commit, O immortal!" (*apāma somam amṛtā abhūmāganma jyotir avidāma devān; kiṃ nūnam asmān kṛṇavad arātiḥ kim u dhūrtir amṛta martyasya*).

This was the teaching believed to "open the doors to the freedom from death" (*apāpuretaṃ amatassa dvāraṃ*, MN 26), but this is far from what the Buddha meant by the state of "deathless" (*amata*): "I have renounced everything, freeing myself through the cessation of craving, and since I know myself perfectly, whose follower should I be? I have no master. […] In this world that is so blind, I beat the drum of the deathless" (*sabbañjaho taṇhākkhaye vimutto, sayaṃ abhiññāya kamuddiseyyaṃ, na me ācariyo atthi... andhībhūtasmiṃ lokasmiṃ, āhañchaṃ amatadundubhiṃ*). This is the position of Buddhist teaching also expressed in Iti 84, where the Buddha is compared to the seers of the past, indeed the greatest and best of them (*satthā hi loke paṭhamo mahesi*), and once again it is said that those who are like a Buddha, or like a mendicant who is a disciple of that Buddha, or like a disciple who becomes a trainee, a learned practitioner who preserves and transmits the teaching, also have "beacons of light that proclaim the teaching, opening the doors of the deathless, liberating many from the yokes" (*pabhaṅkarā dhammamudīrayantā, apāpuranti amatassa dvāraṃ, yogā pamocenti bahujjanaṃ te*). Here specifically, *yogā* is mentioned in the plural, meaning liberations from the yokes. Here, the term *yoga* retains its etymological meaning of "yoke"[56], "harness", and it is possible that it is being applied metaphorically to the yoke of death[57],

56 Cf. K. S. Joshi, *On the Meaning of Yoga*, "Philosophy East and West", 1965, 15.1, pp. 53-64. DOI: 10.2307/1397408.

57 In this regard, I note that it would be possible to draw a remarkable parallel between this concept and the Severinian idea expressed about the origin of ontological thought in a work titled *Il Giogo* ("*The Yoke*"), which extensively discusses the problem of death at the dawn of philosophical thought, also mentioning Buddhism as possessing a pre-ontological thought. Cf. E. Severino, *Il Giogo.*

understood as the yoke of concepts leading to subjugation under the notion of death.

It is thus essential to emphasize that the pervasive fear of death, deeply rooted in the psychology of all cultures, appears to have its origins in the realm of ideas, particularly within the historical and cultural conceptions that contemplate and ponder death as a profound problem. Psychology becomes involved as both a problem and a potential solution, where mechanisms of defense and identity preservation come into play. This perspective aligns with the insights of modern thanatologists, who delve into the philosophical underpinnings of this fear.

Plato and Aristotle, for instance, made significant contributions to this discourse by designating true knowledge as ἐπιστήμη, often referred to as "first philosophy" (πρώτη φιλοσοφία)[58]. According to Aristotle, episteme is a form of knowledge that possesses the potential to rescue individuals from the dread of death because it is firmly grounded in truth, rendering it impervious to denial or refutation. In this context, truth stands as an entity that remains unassailable through dialectical reasoning, specifically by means of ἔλεγχος, a process that exposes the inherent self-contradictions within arguments seeking to challenge a genuine thesis. This dialectical approach, as argued by the Testoni et al., assumes a foundational role in the domain of logical argumentation[59].

The authors proceed to contrast this philosophical standpoint with earlier mythological narratives concerning the afterlife, suggesting that the solace these myths once offered began to wane with the emergence of a dichotomy between truth and myth. They introduce the concept of "absolute nothingness", which represents a novel concept in human thought, fundamentally transforming the concept of death into a state of absolute annihilation.

Plato's response to this existential quandary involved the introduction of the notion of "relative Nonbeing" (nothingness), which allowed for the coexistence of Being and Nonbeing, offering an explanatory framework for the continuous transformations and fluctuations in the world. This innovative perspective is characterized as a significant departure from Parmenides' teachings and is referred to as "Platonic parricide".

Aristotle further refined this distinction, systematically delineating between metaphysical or Absolute Being (God) and physical being, which comprises mutable and contingent determinations subject to the influences of time and space. According to the authors, the philosophical frameworks laid down by Plato and Aristotle provide a conceptual remedy for defining truth as the intricate relationship between absolute Being (resembling Zeus or God) and contingent

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Alle origini della Ragione: Eschilo, Adelphi (Milan 1989). Consequently, Buddhism does not experience death as a problem, at least not in the traditional Greek sense. What distinguishes Buddhism is its focus on suffering, while it preserves the ability to transcend death. Cf. pp. 100-101.

58 G. AGAMBEN, *Filosofia prima filosofia ultima. Il sapere dell'Occidente fra metafisica e scienze*, Einaudi (Turin 2023).

59 See I. TESTONI et al., *The Ontological Representation of Death.*

beings (entities), where the former exercises agency in determining the fate of the latter, thus ensuring their eternal existence[60].

Subsequently, the authors elucidate how monotheistic religions, such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, appropriated and adapted this epistemic solution. They translated the metaphysical concept of an eternal Absolute Being into the theological concept of God. Within this theological framework, the "essence of humanity" is defined as the "soul" and "spirit" (ψυχή/νοῦς), which, it is believed, transcend the physical dimension after death and reunite with God. This theological approach was conceived as an attempt to grapple with the enigma of death and the nature of human identity.

Nevertheless, the authors conclude by asserting that despite the considerable efforts made, particularly within the realm of philosophical episteme, this pursuit is deemed the "greatest attempt" yet also the most conspicuous "failure" to comprehensively resolve the profound quandary involving the oscillation between Being and Nonbeing/nothingness and to establish a truly non-illusory conception of salvation following death.

This organizational framework closely adheres to Emanuele Severino's history of ideas. Severino aptly recognizes that the development of nihilistic conceptions, wherein being transforms into non-being, leading to absolute nothingness and definitive cessation of existence, correlates with the evolution of a specific notion of death. This notion characterizes death not as an evolutionary or transformative process but as the complete annihilation of an individual's being.

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60 This concept is subsequently elaborated upon by Christian philosophers who perceived in this divine power the adequate justification for their inquiries. Brentano, for instance, tends to emphasize that only in God can being (*esse*) and essence (*essentia*) coincide, since every entity (*ēns*) partakes in being in proportion to its essence, which is an intrinsic principle of receptive limitation proportionate to divine perfection. Cf. M. ANTONELLI & F. BOCCACCINI, *Franz Brentano. Mente, coscienza, realtà*, Carocci (Rome 2021). In this system, God emerges as the *ratiō entis*: that which confers the possibility of existence upon entities by virtue of His pure being, thereby delineating the analogical structure of Thomistic ontology and inaugurating the principle of configuring units of order. In Thomas Aquinas' philosophy, the connection between entities and essence depends on an unequal possession of the same perfection, whereas Brentano acknowledges that such an analogical conception of being is not properly found in Aristotle, where the idea of alethic being (τὸ δὲ εἶναι ὡς τὸ ἀληθές) prevails instead—a notion that is not merely a copula but a predicate of truth in existential form (οὐσία intended as "existence"). Nevertheless, this ontological hierarchy is what allowed for a clearer distinction between being and entities, insofar as it became apparent that the latter exist solely by virtue of the former, which, if identified with a divinity, holds the power to grant or withdraw existence at will. This conception in Buddhism is placed on the same level as the problem of authority and the verification of power structures, and thus rejected, as there cannot exist a being superior to others capable of conferring existence upon things. Instead, there exists a qualitative distinction between reality perceived partially and limitedly, populated by conditioned designations or elements, and the sole, unique total reality that foregoes divisions—the unconditioned (*asaṅkhata*)—which coincides with *nibbāna*. Cf. A. STELLA & F. DIVINO, *The Metaphysical Turn in the History of Thought: Anaximander and Buddhist Philosophy*, "Philosophies", 2023, 8.6, No. 99. DOI: 10.3390/philosophies8060099.

It is worth noting that modern thanatologists often overlook the fact that in this regard, Severino's thoughts were presaged by the anthropologist Ernesto De Martino. While initially trained as a historian of religions, De Martino later emerged as a prominent figure in ethnographic and ethnological studies, pioneering the field of ethnopsychiatry in Italy. His work posits that existential problems have their roots in cultural phenomena and historical circumstances, and when inadequately managed by cultural and religious constructs—be they forms of thought, rituals, customs, or mythologies—these problems can manifest themselves culturally as pathologies. De Martino scrutinizes psychiatric phenomena identified as "end of the world" crises (*Weltuntergangserlebnis*), a term coined by psychiatrists to describe the experiences of schizophrenic patients[61]. He demonstrates that similar phenomena are recurrent in cultural contexts and classifies them as "cultural syndromes" or CBS ("Culture-bound syndromes"). De Martino analyzes various instances of CBS in ethnographic literature and directly observes one such phenomenon in his renowned study on Tarantism, a form of hysteria intertwined with the religious traditions of Apulia but with deeper historical roots that may predate Christianity[62]. At De Martino's time, Christianity provided the religious framework attempting to address these concerns. Furthermore, De Martino engages in theoretical reflections on death, offering foundational insights for those endeavoring to construct a psychology of death within a Buddhist context.

According to De Martino, the anthropological risk of losing presence manifests as a peril in which the perspective of negativity isolates itself within consciousness and becomes parasitic[63]. Consequently, all other contents of consciousness take on allusive or symbolic qualities with respect to the feared event. In particular, all behaviors acquire a prefigurative significance in relation to that event, drawing upon not entirely coincidental analogies.

If we accept Severino's definition that nihilism is "the persuasion that being is nothing"[64], then the anthropological risk of losing presence represents a threat made possible by the implicit acceptance of nihilistic belief. Framed in these terms, the problem is exclusively anthropological. It is the idea that forcefully imposes itself as a human model for organizing the world; it is the nihilistic faith that "being, either becoming or being still, is merely nothing (while it is Necessity that is the nothing-of-being or being-that-is-nothing)", which "abstractly separates nothing from its being"[65]. This separation, foundational in the Buddhist worldview

61 A. Wetzel, *Das weltuntergangserlebnis in der schizophrenie*, "Zeitschrift für die gesamte Neurologie und Psychiatrie", 1922, 78, pp. 403–428. DOI: 10.1007/BF02867625.

62 R. Rossetti, *Nel nome di Asclepio il tarantismo oltre la lettura di Ernesto De Martino*, "Segni e Comprensione", 2012, 26.76, pp. 88-118. DOI: 10.1285/i18285368aXXVIn76p88.

63 E. De Martino, *Crisis of presence and religious reintegration*, "HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory", 2012, 2.2, pp. 431-433. DOI: 10.14318/hau2.2.024.

64 E. Severino, *Destino della Necessità. Κατὰ τὸ χρεών*, Adelphi (Milan 1980): p. 50.

65 Ibid., p. 57.

(called *lokassa atthaṅgama* in the suttas), sustains the perception of things as perpetually oscillating. Severino describes this oscillation as ἐπαμφοτερίζειν, and it consists in the psychological uncertainty between the idea of being and the idea of non-being, "the nothing-of-being", and it establishes the self-identity of nothing in such isolation.

Absence cannot be present; such a notion would be inherently contradictory. However, the idea of absence can be present. Similarly, nothingness cannot exist, but the emergence of its idea constitutes a disquieting perspective that fuels anxieties and fears. The concept of death in Buddhism directly engages with the notions of being and nothingness. Simultaneously, it is closely intertwined with the issue of cognition. Expressions such as "unborn" (*ajāta*) and "immortal" (*amata*) are frequent in the Pāli canon when referring to someone who attains the state of Buddhahood: "liberated from the bonds of birth and death". However, this bondage, as will soon become clear, exists only as a misunderstanding. We can trace very ancient origins of this reflection, as seen in the Ṛgveda (10.129.2), which speaks of a time when death was not a problem: "there was no death at that time, nor immortality. There was no distinction between night and day. Only *tad* [that], by its power, breathed, alone, but there was no air. Apart from *tad*, there was nothing else" (*na mṛtyur āsīd amṛtaṃ na tarhi na rātryā ahna āsīt praketaḥ ānīd avātaṃ svadhayā tad ekaṃ tasmād dhānyan na paraḥ kiṃ canāsa*). It is only later that death emerges as a problem in Indian thought: a genesis of death is identified, a moment from which it becomes a concern in history. This is remarkably similar to Severino's identification of the emergence of death as a problem in Western psychology, starting from the Platonic parricide of Parmenides. The implications for this ideology in the West are well-known to modern thanatologists: "with Neo-positivism, Utilitarism, Materialism, and Nietzsche's confutation of any absolute knowledge, the security guaranteed by the incontestable knowledge was overwhelmed by the total contingency of Being: Every Being springs from and returns to Nonbeing/nothing and no absolute Being awaits it after death"[66]. Actually, rather than being just philosophical speculations, these outcomes are justified by psychological deceptions, as Buddhism clearly explains.

In Buddhist thought, death is conceptualized as a cognitive deception. The eminent philologist Rune Johansson translates a passage from the Aṅguttaranikāya concerning the attainment of *nirvāṇa* as follows: *amatogadhā sabbe dhammā, nibbānapariyosānā sabbe dhammā*, which can be rendered as "all mental contents (or: processes) merge into the deathless, have their end in nibbāna"[67]. Therefore, one who achieves the state of a Buddha is immersed in a state of "without death" (*amataṃ vigayha*). Although this centrality of death has been transformed in various ways within Buddhist elaborations, it is undeniable that in its more archaic forms, as in all traditions that originated in the Magadha

66 TESTONI et al., *The Ontological Representation of Death*, cit. p. 66.

67 R. JOHANSSON, *The Psychology of Nirvana*, George Allen & Unwin (London 1969): p. 23.

region, the issue of death was fundamental. To the extent that the Buddha himself was considered "deathless" (*amata*), it prompts us to reflect on the idea of death and the end of life.

Primarily, it can be stated that Buddhism conceives of death as a perceived condition. The immortality of the Buddha does not involve transcending the immutable laws of nature but rather rediscovering the true nature of being, whose destiny is to oppose death. Properly understood, "death" is nothing more than the confusion of a condition in which being no longer appears as it once did but rather becomes in some way nothing.

However, that which is cannot not be (ἡ μὲν ὅπως ἔστιν τε καὶ ὡς οὐκ ἔστι μὴ εἶναι)[68]. The origin of misunderstanding is purely cognitive. Words invoke things into appearance, but everything is merely an aspect of being. Therefore, everything ultimately speaks of being in its existence and in its negation of nothingness. However, this appearance as an aspect of being reveals the limitation of cognition, which perceives being as manifold rather than as the unity it truly is. The unity of being is ineffable, but its multiplicity, which appears, is infinitely nameable. It can be named as many times as there are possible names to evoke being, but every evocation is an aspect of being that appears. Nevertheless, cognition tends to organize these aspects of being as independent entities that oppose each other, with one determining itself by negating the other. As the truth of being, everything that appears is being that negates nothingness. Yet, as a psychosemantic organization of the world, everything is reified as something that can also not be. Even "nothingness", as a nameable word, is a concept, an ideal reified entity, and although it contradicts itself, being both is and is not non-being, negating the meaning it purports to convey. It is not due to its apparent self-negation that nothingness is perceived; rather, it acts as a perpetual anthropological threat, prefiguring the unsettling possibility that what exists might become what does not exist, in other words, annihilation. Being would cease to be and become something else or nothing. The nihilistic interpretation of Buddhism often portrays it as a philosophy that exalts death, mortifying the individual and viewing liberation as a kind of supreme death. However, within the culture of reincarnation, one would never 'truly die' because a new birth always awaits the soul after death. This idea of "final death" (which, for nihilists, corresponds to definitive annihilation of being) finds no support in the canonical texts. It is important to remember, for example, that in the Saṃyuttanikāya, "it is explicitly denied that the arahant is annihilated in death"[69].

Other scholars have approached the matter differently: since psychological identity is an epiphenomenon arising from the aggregation of a series of psychophysical elements that remain aggregated due to factors enabling the repetition of associative and appropriative mechanisms linked to identity, from a

68 PARMENIDES, Περὶ Φύσεως, *fragment* 2.

69 R. JOHANSSON, *The Psychology of Nirvana*, cit. p. 61.

Buddhist perspective, there is no "self" capable of experiencing death, assuming it exists in the manner in which we are inclined to conceptualize it[70]. This is because psychological identity is a construct, impermanent, and cannot be reduced to mere existence.

Parmenides aims to emphasize that the multiplicity of being that appears is determined by the totality of names (πάντ'όνομα). However, this does not mean that their nominal existence is a non-existence or an existence of an inferior kind. Existence simply is. What cognitive perception does is mediate the conception of existence, perceiving it as multiple manifestations subsequently organized into nameable entities that can be recalled upon appearance. This process also generates a cycle of interdependence between the observer and the observed, where one relies on the other and constantly modifies the other, without one being entirely generated by the other. The two aspects (observer and observed) are, actually, relative manifestations of a single reality, as Nāgārjuna would put it. The differences are only apparent and exist within the multiple configuration of the relative world, allowing for interaction and experience. The reduction of reality to appearance is what allows being to manifest itself while simultaneously deceiving consciousness about the true nature of being itself.

Nāgārjuna acknowledges that, for something to be real (*sadbhūtam*), it should be permanent, unchanging, and eternal, free from alterations or modifications of any kind. Therefore, it should exist as an eternal and independent being. In his analysis, the Indian philosopher clearly demonstrates that, in our worldview, there exists the possibility for an entity (*bhāva*) to become a non-entity (*abhāva*), that the laws (*dharma*) are mutable and not eternal. This has led many Western commentators to perceive Nāgārjuna as an ontological nihilist.

However, Nāgārjuna merely observes that the idea that the being of things becomes nothing is, fundamentally, our conception of the world, as well as what appears to us. Furthermore, Nāgārjuna identifies the inconsistency of human sciences, founded on the axiom that things have their own intrinsic identity (*svabhāva*), even though everything demonstrates interdependence among entities, favoring non-intrinsic identity.

It should be noted, however, that this condition of emptiness (*śūnyatā*) of entities does not equate to their being nothingness. Nāgārjuna is unequivocal in cautioning the reader against any nihilistic interpretation of his psychological theory. Therefore, any interpretation of Nāgārjuna's work as nihilistic arises from a fundamental misunderstanding or inattention. Care must be taken with what Nāgārjuna says: the things that we perceive as separate and that, due to this distinction, we identify as different and possessing independent identities from each other, ultimately reveal themselves as non-independent. Their identity depends on mutual opposition, thus not being an independent identity. Therefore,

70 L. Puntso & M. Aguilar, *Le bouddhisme et la mort*, "Études sur la Mort", 2014, 146, pp. 155-166. DOI: 10.3917/eslm.146.0155.

it cannot be said that things are truly as we perceive them. This is Nāgārjuna's fundamental point. In no way does this line of reasoning lead to nihilistic consequences. The "what-is" (*tattva*) of things is never identified with nothingness (*abhāva*), but it is equally true that the act of perceiving things is mediated by an unconscious projection (*prapañca*) that distorts cognition greatly. Nāgārjuna opposes the position of those he calls nihilists (*ucchedavāda*), for whom if a thing no longer appears, literally, it does not exist (*nāsti*), and therefore, it is destroyed (*uccheda*). Indeed, "Nāgārjuna is not saying that *bhāvas* and *dharmas* do not exist but only that they do not exist as he believes that we normally take them to exist—i.e., through selfexistence. It is only that they are self-contained rather than the products of causes and conditions that is rejected. That is, the existence of *bhāvas* and *dharmas* is not disputed, only their mode of existence: they exist, but they are dependently-arisen and thus are empty of independent self-existence"[71].

The De Martino theory posits that an individual's consciousness and the psychological capacity to perceive oneself as part of a socio-culturally structured world can be attributed to the concept of "presence", a concept borrowed from Heidegger's notion of *Dasein*. However, it is well-known that the socio-culturally constructed world is far from the stable and secure monolith that our psyche believes it to be. Death, without a doubt, is what most jeopardizes the stability of an individual's presence. Similarly, in Buddhism, the self is treated as an impermanent psychoanthropological construct that deludes itself into independence from the world, and *dukkha* is nothing but the constant collision of the self with the inadequacies of this view, namely, the non-acceptance of the interdependence of all beings. Culture must intervene to protect the psychology of individuals, and society, in turn, is structured as a force placed in charge of the economic management of valorization devices. In other words, "economy" is understood by De Martino as οἰκονομία, the management of the common good. Culture has the ability to assign value to certain entities over others. The management of these cultural values is the economic power held by society. Such management is necessary for De Martino, as without it, presence could not determine itself in history. He reflects on a presumed era when presence had not yet been determined as a value. However, this era predates history and the limitations of what anthropologists call "magic", or performative efficacy, towards what would later become "religious" or ritual "technique". Myth, tradition, and religion, as well as epistemological systems, are nothing more than protective forces of presence against the dam of nihilistic terror that it may become nothing, i.e., devoid of value, irrelevant in the face of history. This is also the 'historical drama of the magical world', peculiar to primitive societies at the dawn of history. It refers to the individual's inner struggle between magical tradition and rational modernity and how this struggle is reflected in society and history.

71 R. Jones, *On What is Real in Nāgārjuna's "Middle Way"*, "Comparative Philosophy", 2020, 11.1, pp. 3-31: 15. DOI: 10.31979/2151-6014(2020).110105.

> However, if it is true that the "rupture" of the unity of presence from the categories of action means the annihilation of the very possibility of existence in human history, and if the claim to stretch this cultural and historical void into an imaginary cultural history is inherently contradictory, the "risk" of "such annihilation exists", unfolding in all its power in so-called primitive civilizations and diminishing gradually and assuming less harsh forms as cultural life advances: precisely as Paci admitted.[72]

This aligns with the psycho-thanatological idea for which "every culture provides a sense that life is meaningful by offering an account of the origin of the universe, prescriptions for appropriate behavior, and an assurance of immortality"[73]. In De Martino's perspective, the moment of confronting grief represents a critical juncture in which the presence of an individual may be at risk of dissipating. While in other instances, culture develops sophisticated mythic narratives or ritual reiterations that serve to ward off the looming specter of nothingness through a repetition of eternal time via the ritualistic reenactment of myth (which, in turn, recounts primordial origins wherein existence, by manifesting itself, asserts its positivity and thus counters the negative)[74], in everyday cultural life, there exist aspects that can similarly serve as bulwarks against this existential threat. However, these aspects must contend with the inherent risk involved. The crisis of mourning, for instance, constitutes a liminal moment during which there is a perilous possibility that one's presence may fail to entirely transcend the mournful situation. The "ritual lamentation" or "ritual

72 E. De Martino, *Morte e pianto rituale. Dal lamento funebre antico al pianto di Maria*, Einaudi (Turin 2021): p. 16.

73 I. Testoni et al., *Meaning of life, representation of death*, cit. p. 512.

74 In Severino's work, the role of myth serves a function quite akin to that which it holds for De Martino. In his book, aptly titled "Oltrepassare" ("Transcending, Going beyond"), Severino establishes a connection between the issue of death and mythological functions. According to him, "the interpretation guiding historical-anthropological sciences suggests that from the very beginning, humans reject death. However, they gradually experience it, emerging from a torpor even more ancient than that beginning", cf. E. Severino, *Oltrepassare*, Adelphi (Milan 2007): p. 30. The crux of the matter lies in the fact that at an initial interpretation, death presents itself as nothing other than "pain and anguish" (p. 31), a sensation vehemently opposed by the will to live, which does not conceive of death as an end. Unfortunately, as Severino continues to assert, "at a certain point, the will to live becomes convinced of its own failure. [...] When the will for the body not to die acknowledges its own failure, death ceases to be pain and anguish over the decay of the bodies one wants to live with and one's own. Instead, it becomes the inevitability of such decay – which is thus rejected in a new way, by invoking another life" (p. 32). At this juncture, religions, "which appear within the interpretation of human history, almost always express this dual and progressive refusal of death". For Severino, myth serves this fundamental purpose: humans are filled with anguish in the face of the world's becoming (a becoming, as we have mentioned, that is a misunderstanding of history). The purpose of myth, according to Severino, is to provide reassurance against the unpredictability of the advancing Nothingness. This unpredictability that distresses the human being is rendered predictable (i.e., reassuring) through mythological narration.

mourning" ("pianto rituale"), nonetheless, is a valid tool that De Martino acknowledges within Western culture's commemoration of mourning as an almost mystical moment. Consider, for instance, the extensive iconography depicting the mourning of Mary at the death of Jesus. Nevertheless, De Martino recognizes funeral lamentation as a cultural phenomenon codified by specific traditions in various circumstances, far from being solely driven by emotional impulses, while not negating the significance of genuine grief for the loss of loved ones.

> The loss of a loved one is, in the most conspicuous manner, the experience of that which passes without and against us. Corresponding to this ordeal, we are urgently called upon to engage in the arduous task of becoming courageous facilitators of death, within ourselves and with ourselves, for our deceased, lifting ourselves from the anguish where "everyone weeps in the same way" to that 'knowledge' of weeping which, through objectification, dries the tears and reopens the path to life and value. However, this arduous endeavor may also falter: grief then manifests as an irresolvable crisis, wherein one suffers the progressive risk of the narrowing of all potential formal horizons of presence.[75]

In a subsequent section[76], De Martino conducts an analysis of psychological theories pertaining to death. It is worth noting that these theories must be approached with a degree of caution, given their reliance on the psychological literature of De Martino's era, notably rooted in psychoanalysis, a discipline for which he held great esteem. De Martino observes that the realm of modern psychology has allocated relatively limited attention to the complexities of the grieving process. He underscores that this deficiency can be partly ascribed to the prevailing notion that mourning crises in the contemporary world are less menacing than those experienced in antiquity, not to mention within primitive societies. Moreover, it stems from the perspective that the grieving process, in and of itself, does not warrant a comprehensive psychological framework, given its capacity to precipitate diverse neuroses or psychoses contingent upon individual predispositions.

De Martino accentuates that modern psychology has occasionally delved into the subject of mourning and atypical reactions to the loss of a beloved individual. For instance, Pierre Janet construes the crisis of mourning as an outcome of the imperative to repress behaviors that are no longer applicable to the deceased person and to establish new behaviors that acknowledge the irrevocable reality of death. Janet posits that this process necessitates a certain degree of effort, the outcome of which may vary. Failure may manifest either in persisting with actions as if the deceased were still alive or in the abrupt oblivion of the mournful event through the onset of sudden amnesia.

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75 E. De Martino, *Morte e pianto rituale*, cit. p. 44.
76 Ibid., cit. pp. 50-6.

Nevertheless, De Martino voices criticism of Janet's interpretation, contending that it does not furnish a dependable criterion for distinguishing between successful and unsuccessful mourning work. He asserts that the delay in acknowledging death, as often exemplified by funeral rituals and myths of the afterlife, is not intrinsically pathological if it ultimately serves to facilitate the process of "laying our deceased to rest within us". Conversely, abrupt amnesia does not qualify as pathological solely because it occurs "prematurely" or affects an "excessive" number of actions. Pathology ensues from the incapacity to properly internalize and resolve the mourning process.

De Martino emphasizes that the assessment ought to be qualitative rather than quantitative, focusing on the actual progression toward value achieved through mourning as labor. He suggests that any delay or premature advancement (without framing them as such, but simply as temporal appropriateness) can be beneficial, provided they gradually reintegrate the compromised cultural activity disrupted by the crisis.

Furthermore, De Martino delves into Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory[77], which distinguishes between mourning and melancholia. Freud posits that in mourning, the world appears bereft due to the loss of a cherished individual, whereas in melancholia, the self becomes destitute. The mourning process entails the detachment of libidinal energy from the departed object and its redirection toward new investments. However, should this detachment and redirection falter, libidinal ties to the deceased can persist, resulting in a detachment from reality and the onset of psychotic hallucinations.

De Martino also probes the psychoanalytic interpretation of mourning within primitive and ancient cultures, where the demarcation between mourning and melancholia seems to blur. In these contexts, mourning rituals often encompass self-accusations, self-flagellation, and self-punishment reminiscent of melancholic behavior. Additionally, the outbursts of aggression, sexual orgies, and feasts marking the conclusion of mourning periods bear resemblance to the manic phase of manic-depressive psychosis.

Géza Róheim sought to reconcile mourning with the clinical profile of melancholic depression and manic aggression by postulating that both phenomena involve the projection of inner conflicts[78]. Róheim drew inspiration from Freud's theory of the primal father being killed and consumed by jealous sons, an act believed to have initiated human history. The initial internalization of this conflict led to a melancholic phase characterized by self-accusations and self-flagellation. External projection of this conflict, redirected toward an external adversary,

77 S. FREUD, *Trauer und Melancholie*, "Internationale Zeitschrift für Ärztliche Psychoanalyse", 1917, 4.6, pp. 288–301.

78 R. C. CALOGERAS, *Gèza Róheim: Psychoanalytic Anthropologist or Radical Freudian?*, "American Imago", 1971, 28.2, pp. 146-157.

resolved the crisis and transitioned into a manic phase, resembling manic-depressive psychosis.

Building upon these theories[79], Melanie Klein underscored the imperative of restoring not only the departed loved one but also the internal world during the mourning process. She posited that mourning work involves revisiting processes characteristic of the manic-depressive cycle but cautioned that it can falter in cases where individuals have failed to establish secure internal "good objects" during childhood.

De Martino concludes by offering a critique of psychoanalytic theories for their propensity to remain largely detached from the cultural tradition emphasizing the transcendence of the mourning situation into value. He underscores that cultural forces play a pivotal role in surmounting the critical juncture of mourning and resisting the allure of crisis. In this sense, mourning as a pathological condition becomes part of history, serving as a negative facet within the context of cultural redemption. This is particularly evident in the ancient Mediterranean religious civilizations that existed prior to the advent of Christianity and its novel ἔθος concerning life and death. One vital cultural element in addressing mourning crises in antiquity was the ritualistic funeral lament, a significant component in De Martino's analysis of how culture grappled with the perpetual threat posed by a nature devoid of its human illumination.

The field of thanatology has had to investigate this aspect nowadays, initially believing that the correlation between spirituality and QoL was due to the fact that "religion offers a remedy for the fear of death evoked by the symptoms of severe diseases"[80]. The general thanatology only initiated to gain importance from early 1950s recovering mostly from the longer philosophical and religious traditions that had always been concerned with death[81].

The presence of numerous culturally constructed forms of funeral lamentation in the ancient world corroborates De Martino's hypothesis that ritual mourning (*planctus*) serves as a protective mechanism against the risk of presence. The concept of ἔξαρχος γόοιο in Greece serves as more than just confirmation; however, De Martino does not delve into the psychology of the Asian world or India. Indeed, we encounter forms of lamentation for the death of the Buddha, but at this juncture, it is imperative to contextualize them within the framework of Buddhist psychology and their resolutions to the "crisis of presence".

The Buddhist approach to death seems to superficially corroborate the Demartinian hypothesis, in that it appears that Buddhist discourses on the topic of death are directed towards a conscious acceptance of it. Mindfulness, therefore,

79 See also E. SÁNCHEZ-PARDO, *Cultures of the Death Drive: Melanie Klein and Modernist Melancholia*, Duke University Press (Durham 2003). DOI: 10.1215/9780822384748.

80 I. TESTONI et al., *Meaning of life, representation of death*, cit. p. 512.

81 L. FONSECA, & I. TESTONI, *The Emergence of Thanatology and Current Practice in Death Education*, "OMEGA - Journal of Death and Dying", 2012, 64.2, pp. 157–169. DOI: 10.2190/OM.64.2.d.

could be seen as nothing more than the mental state that, among its various proven psychological benefits, also leads to a state of fearlessness in the face of death, which is apparently depicted as an inevitable fact.

> Unforeseen and unknown, such is the nature of the life of mortals: difficult and short, bound to suffering. There is no way for those who are born to avoid death. With the approach of old age, death draws near, such is the nature of living beings. Just as ripe fruit is always at risk of falling, so too are mortals who are born always at risk of dying. Just as a clay pot shaped by a potter eventually shatters, so is the life of mortals. Young and old, foolish and wise, all are subject to the power of death, destined to die. [...] And so the world is tormented by old age and death. But for this, the wise do not give in to lamentation [*socanta*], for the wise understand the way of the world. For those whose path is unknown to you, not knowing where they come from or where they go, your funeral lamentation [*paridevati*] is in vain, seeing neither end. If the person, overwhelmed by despair and anguish, can glean even a single benefit from it, then those who see clearly (the wise) would do the same. But it is neither through weeping nor lamentation that you will find peace [*santi*] of mind [*cetas*]. This will only lead to more suffering and affliction of your body. Becoming emaciated and pale will only harm yourself, certainly not the dead, and your lamentations are in vain. If a person does not abandon torment, they will continue to suffer over and over. The lamentation of those who have died drags one under the influence of torment. [...] Because everything you imagine turns out to be different from what you believe [*yena yena hi maññanti, tato taṃ hoti aññathā*]. Such is the separation [*vinābhāva*], see how the world goes![82]

Please note that this lengthy passage is far from a resignation to the struggle against death. Here, the Buddha often compares death to a poisoned arrow (*salla*), but these continuous expressions of apparent powerlessness in the face of the arrow of death do not seem to align well with the discourses on the immortality of one who has attained liberation or with the idea that all dualities are actually cognitive illusions. In fact, the binary concept of life and death, like many others,

82 Cf. Sallasutta, Snp 3.8. Original: *animittamanaññātaṃ, maccānaṃ idha jīvitaṃ; kasirañca parittañca, tañca dukkhena saṃyutaṃ. na hi so upakkamo atthi, yena jātā na miyyare; jarampi patvā maraṇaṃ, evaṃdhammā hi pāṇino. phalānamiva pakkānaṃ, pāto patanato bhayaṃ; evaṃ jātāna maccānaṃ, niccaṃ maraṇato bhayaṃ. yathāpi kumbhakārassa, katā mattikabhājanā; sabbe bhedanapariyantā, evaṃ maccāna jīvitaṃ. daharā ca mahantā ca, ye bālā ye ca paṇḍitā; sabbe maccuvasaṃ yanti, sabbe maccuparāyaṇā. [...] evamabbhāhato loko, maccunā ca jarāya ca; tasmā dhīrā na socanti, viditvā lokapariyāyaṃ. yassa maggaṃ na jānāsi, āgatassa gatassa vā; ubho ante asampassaṃ, niratthaṃ paridevasi. paridevayamāno ce, kiñcidatthaṃ udabbahe; sammūḷho hiṃsamattānaṃ, kayirā ce naṃ vicakkhaṇo. na hi ruṇṇena sokena, santiṃ pappoti cetaso; bhiyyassuppajjate dukkhaṃ, sarīraṃ cupahaññati. kiso vivaṇṇo bhavati, hiṃsamattānamattanā; na tena petā pālenti, niratthā paridevanā. sokamappajahaṃ jantu, bhiyyo dukkhaṃ nigacchati; anutthunanto kālaṅkataṃ, sokassa vasamanvagū. [...] yena yena hi maññanti, tato taṃ hoti aññathā; etādiso vinābhāvo, passa lokassa pariyāyaṃ.*

is part of the dualisms that Buddhism identifies as psychological delusions. The key lies in emphasizing death as a fact of the world (*lokassa*). Certainly, it is inevitable, and as such, lamentation and weeping have no efficacy in conquering it. Death is intrinsic to the world, it is a fact of the world, and as such, it is inescapable. But what is this "world" in the end?

The point of this inevitability ("this is how the world goes"), however, is to what extent the event of death is approached by Buddhists as an annihilation of being and how instead it is an illusion, if not a passage to another form of existence. I do not want to invoke *karma* here, as it is quite controversial to claim that the idea of the cycle of death and rebirth can be used by Buddhists as a comfort against the fear of death. On the contrary, the cycle of rebirth is a prison and is repeatedly referred to as a true torture to which beings are subjected and from which they must escape (*vimutti*, liberation). But if escape from this cycle (*saṃsāra*) does not imply a sort of total death, as death is also seen as a deception, what is *parinibbāna*?

In essence, the question centers around how Buddhists view death and whether it is seen as an end or a transition to another state of existence, particularly in the context of *parinibbāna*, which is often understood as the final, complete liberation of an enlightened being.

We have previously said that the "world" (*loka*) in Early Buddhism is described as a psychological construct derived from conceptions rooted in dualistic divisions: the world is born in two[83]. The "world" represents an internal boundary within the spatial framework organized by social influences. It is within this framework that dichotomies, serving as an ordering principle of society, exert their influence on the psyche of individuals, thus organizing what presents itself through a succession of cognitive deceptions. It is important to note that the "world" does indeed exist, albeit it does not inherently embody the ultimate reality or the veritable nature of existence. Instead, it is a construct that assumes its semblance by virtue of the multitude of minds that uphold it through their faith in its existence. Significantly, Buddhist doctrine also proposes the dissolution or deconstruction of the world.

This discussion prompts the question: Does the cessation of the world entail the cessation of the conception of death as transition? Might Buddhists perceive death as a psychological inevitability that, once the world (*loka*) crystallizes into an organized system of values, necessarily becomes the inexorable outcome—a belief that entities emerging from this value system cease to exist?

In AN 8.74, the Buddha underscores the significance and advantages of cultivating mindfulness of death (*dutiyamaraṇassati*). He imparts that when one systematically develops and nurtures this form of mindfulness, it has the potential to catalyze profound spiritual growth and realization, culminating in the

83 Cf. SN 12.15: *…dvayanissito khvāyaṃ, kaccāna, loko yebhuyyena: atthitañceva natthitañca.*

attainment of the deathless. The deathless refers to a transcendent state beyond the confines of mortality, often associated with enlightenment or nirvāṇa[84].

The Buddha proceeds to provide guidance on how to effectively cultivate mindfulness of death. This practice commences with contemplation on the diverse circumstances that may lead to one's demise. Such contemplation encompasses the recognition of potential perils, such as snakebites, scorpion or centipede stings, accidents such as falling from cliffs, illnesses such as food poisoning, or imbalances within the body (related to bile, phlegm, or piercing winds). The aim of this introspection is to acknowledge one's vulnerability to the impermanence of life and to appreciate that death can manifest suddenly and unexpectedly.

Following the contemplation of potential causes of death, the practitioner is advised to engage in a self-assessment of their ethical and spiritual condition. This involves an inquiry into whether any unwholesome or negative qualities persist within their character that have yet to be relinquished. It is recognized that the presence of such unskillful traits could obstruct the practitioner's spiritual progress in the event of their demise.

Upon identifying unskillful qualities within themselves, the practitioner is encouraged to make a resolute commitment to their elimination. This undertaking demands the application of fervent enthusiasm, unswerving effort, unwavering zeal, unflagging vigor, steadfast perseverance, unwavering mindfulness, and astute situational awareness. It serves as a clarion call for active engagement in personal growth and ethical refinement.

In cases where self-examination reveals the absence of unskillful qualities, the practitioner is directed to focus their efforts towards meditation and the cultivation of skillful qualities. This encompasses dedicated and continuous training in virtuous and wholesome behaviors, thoughts, and attitudes.

The metaphorical analogy of extinguishing a fire on one's clothing or head is employed to underscore the urgency and determination requisite in the process of eliminating unskillful qualities[85]. Just as one would respond swiftly and decisively to extinguish a fire, practitioners are encouraged to take prompt and resolute action in addressing negative traits.

Ultimately, the practice of mindfulness of death (*maraṇasati*), when undertaken with due diligence and in accordance with these principles, is believed to yield substantial benefits. It functions not only as a poignant reminder of the transient nature of life but also as a catalyst for spiritual development. By acknowledging the fragility of existence and actively endeavoring to transcend negative qualities, practitioners draw closer to the deathless state—an emblem of liberation from the cyclic pattern of birth and death.

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84 See also G. D. Bond, *Theravada Buddhism's Meditations on Death and the Symbolism of Initiatory Death*, "History of Religions", 1980, 19.3, pp. 237-258. DOI: 10.1086/462847.

85 See the Ādittapariyāyasutta in SN 35.28 for more information.

The key to understanding these passages is found in another sutta, AN 6.14, in which death is explicitly linked to a psychological aspect, namely, *papañca*. Fundamental to comprehending the cognitive mechanism is what Buddhists refer to as the concept of mental proliferation (*papañca*), upon which discursive thought (*vikalpa*), reasoning (*vicāra*), and conjecture (*vitakka*) depend. It is from discursive thought that the two extremes originate: the idea of being (*bhāva*) and the idea of non-being (*abhāva*). As demonstrated by Johansson, the aspect of *papañca* is closely connected to the cognitive delusions implicit in the concept of *loka*. However, since the "end of the world" (*loka-anta, lokassa antaṃ*) is also the prototype for the concept of liberation (*nibbāna*) we can use the psychological analysis that Johansson provided in his book *The Psychology of Nirvana* in order to better understand what the Buddhists really meant. Johansson found that *nibbana* can be defined through a set of negations which is worth quoting entirely:

(a) One group of negations seem to refer to the social world. This world is crowded, full of disturbance, trouble and fear. Nibbāna, on the contrary, is *asambādha*, 'uncrowded', *akhalita*, 'undisturbed', *nirupatāpa*, 'untroubled', and *abhaya*, 'free from fear'. These negatives seem mainly to express the feeling of safety that nibbana inspires: it is free from all nuisance and disturbance.

(b) Then we find a group concerning our personal conditions of life. We humans are certainly subjected to birth, becoming, creation, compounding, illness, obstruction, old age and death. Nibbāna, on the other hand, is *ajāta*, 'freedom from birth', *abhūta*, 'freedom from becoming', *akata*, 'freedom from creation', *asankhata*, 'freedom from compounding', *abyādhi*, 'without illness', *anītika*, 'without illness', *anālaya*, 'freedom', *ajara*, 'freedom from old age', *amata* or *amara*, 'deathless'. This group looks like a negation of the conventional definition of *dukkha*. It seems to describe a perfectly static, and at the same time ideal state, where everything is permanently well.

(c) If this is true about the general conditions of life, it is also true about the ethical state. In contrast to the hostility, aggression and impurities of this world, nibbāna is *asapatta*, 'without hostility', *avyāpajja*, 'harmless', and *asankiliṭṭha*, 'without impurities'.

(d) We have also a group of entirely psychological attributes, corresponding to our previous findings. In this world, our consciousness is characterized by ignorance and wrong views: diffuseness and illusion, grief, sensuality, fear and desires. In nibbāna these are eradicated: nibbāna is *anāsava*, 'without obsessions', *nippapañca*, 'without diffuseness or illusion', *asoka*, 'free from sorrow', *abhaya*, 'without fear', *virāga*, 'without desire'. The last two points describe nibbāna as a state of ethical perfection and a conscious state of realism, knowledge, calm, and detachment.

(e) It is of particular interest to see whether nibbāna was contrasted to the physical world and described in terms of negations of this world. It is difficult to find any clear examples of this. The Buddha spoke mainly about human conditions and human achievements. The negations *asankhata*,

> *abhūta*, *akata*, mentioned above, are usually referred to the 'physical' group and translated, 'uncompounded', 'not become', 'not made'. Seen in their context, U 80 [Ud 8.2], it turns out that they too must refer to human conditions. We have also the negations *asankuppa*, unchangeable', and *anidassana*, 'without attribute', but they probably describe the psychological state which is a characteristic of nibbāna, and therefore contrast nibbāna to the usual way of experiencing and not to the physical world. Seen in isolation the mentioned negations could be taken as evidence that the Buddha believed in a metaphysical 'antiworld' – but since they are ambiguous they have to be fitted into the totality.[86]

In the "construction" of the world, for Buddhists, language is the ultimate tool. Cognition is nothing but this linguistic creation. According to Buddhism, things do not become (the cause is not the effect, it is not a distinct form, nor does the cause substantiate the effect, hence the cause is not immanent in the effect for Buddhists) because no self-sufficiency (*vasavattitā*) is detected in the cause, sufficient to justify the production of the effect. Similarly, in the cognitive process, aspects such as attention and perception simply follow (and are not produced by each other) based on a cognitive order (*cittaniyāma*) that is part of a psychological continuum of mutual conditioning[87].

The doctrine of dependent arising (*paṭiccasamuppannaṃ*) resolves this problem. The Buddha denies that things originate from themselves (*sayaṃ-kata*), but also that they are generated by factors other than themselves (*paraṃ-kata*). This view aligns to some degree the Buddha's thought with that of Emanuele Severino, who predicts that no entity is self-originated or can generate other entities. Like Severino, the Buddha also rejects the idea that a God generates all things, or more explicitly, that God is the cause of all things (*sabbaṃ issara-nimmāṇa-hetu*).

Thus, we must contend with the concept of *nibbāna*. What the Buddha exactly meant when he spoke of this "extinguishment" is not clear. This state of Joy is defined as the supreme good (*nibbānaṃ paramaṃ sukhaṃ*), but there are various ways in which this supreme good is attained. Certainly, the term indicates an extinguishment, similar to that of a lamp's flame, and it is no coincidence that the Buddha uses the metaphor of fire when he argues, for example, that everything is ablaze[88], and burns due to passions (*rāga*), hatred (*dosa*), and delusions (*moha*). In this sense, *nibbāna* appears as a transcendence of human limits, or rather, of the condition in which the human being is a victim of themselves due to unawareness and proceeds through a careful deconstruction (*visaṃkhara*) of those psychobiological apparatuses that allow such subjugation. Once these constituents are identified, the awakened one is no longer conditioned by them. At this point,

86 R. JOHANSSON, *The Psychology of Nirvana*, cit. pp. 45-7, from point (a) to (e).

87 Y. KARUNADASA, *Early Buddhist Teachings. The Middle Position on Theory and Practice*, Wisdom Publications (Somerville 2018): p. 25.

88 Ibid., p. 124.

they are no more prolific (*nippapañca*) than those mechanisms that would usually have led to subjugation.

But even more surprising is the connection between the state of awakening, the overcoming of conditioning to the factors of the world, and the state of immortality (*amata*). It cannot be said, however, that the Buddha becomes immortal in the Christian sense of the term, but rather that he "has won a psychological victory over the inevitable phenomenon of death. The experience of death is present only when one identifies oneself with what is subject to death"[89]. Regarding the relationship between the question of immortality, Buddhism maintains that it "cannot be the perpetuation of a self-identity into eternity. From the Buddhist perspective, immortality is what results from the elimination of the ego-illusion"[90]. What is certain is that for the reasons we have seen so far, Buddhism does not conceive of death as an annihilation of the self, and indeed mindfulness goes towards this exact realization of things.

Indeed, after a careful psychological survey, it has been found that "the analysis illustrates how persons who believe that death is the total annihilation of the individual and personal self-identity lose hope for the future and lose the abilities of resilience more than whoever is persuaded that death is only a great existential passage (existence does not correspond with life)"[91].

Another investigation was conducted to explore the psychological factors associated with the attenuation of death anxiety in individuals who have undergone near-death experiences (NDEs)[92]. This inquiry was motivated by the objective of aligning these empirical observations with the extant body of research concerning NDEs and the theoretical framework of "Terror Management Theory" (TMT), which addresses health-related issues connected to the imminent risk of mortality, oftentimes without adequately furnishing psychological support to the affected individuals.

The research outcomes revealed that participants who had experienced NDEs reported diminished levels of death anxiety in comparison to their counterparts who had not undergone such experiences. Furthermore, a positive correlation emerged, indicating that individuals who had encountered more profound NDEs, as measured by the NDE Scale, manifested even lower levels of death anxiety. Additionally, individuals who had undergone NDEs exhibited heightened levels of self-esteem and mindfulness, and notably, they demonstrated a predilection for interpreting death as a profound transformation rather than as absolute annihilation.

The study employed regression and mediational analyses to elucidate the intricate dynamics underlying these relationships. It was elucidated that NDEs

89 Ibid., p. 137.
90 Ibidem.
91 I. Testoni et al., *The Ontological Representation of Death*, cit. p. 76.
92 S. Bianco et al., *The Psychological Correlates of Decreased Death Anxiety…*

exert a dual influence on the reduction of death anxiety, directly diminishing such anxiety, while also exerting indirect effects by fostering increased self-esteem and shaping altered conceptualizations of death—specifically, encouraging a perspective that perceives death as a transformative phenomenon as opposed to complete annihilation.

It is noteworthy that mindfulness, closely correlated with self-esteem, did not yield a direct or indirect contribution to the mitigation of death anxiety subsequent to an NDE. Nevertheless, an exploratory analysis alluded to the possibility of a sequential mediation process. According to this perspective, NDEs may attenuate the fear of death by initially transforming one's representations of death, followed by an enhancement of mindfulness, and ultimately culminating in increased self-esteem.

These empirical findings substantiate the consistency with prior qualitative and quantitative investigations, reinforcing the assertion that NDEs are inherently linked to the amelioration of death anxiety, particularly when the NDEs are characterized by heightened profundity.

This study contributes to the empirical validation of hypotheses that emanate from Terror Management Theory and the corpus of prior research, thereby lending credence to the notion that NDEs induce elevated levels of self-esteem and mindfulness. These alterations in psychological factors may either be the consequence of or occur concomitantly with shifts in the manner in which individuals perceive the phenomenon of death.

It is worth noting that the interplay among these psychological variables is intricately nuanced, and the causal model proposed in this study remains tentative. Subsequent research endeavors are requisite for the validation and extension of these findings. Furthermore, the study posits that the transformative nature of NDEs may serve as a catalyst for individuals to disengage from preoccupations pertaining to social status and future-oriented concerns, thereby fostering mindfulness and ultimately diminishing death anxiety.

3. Meditating the disgusting: the psychology of (non)dualism

The psycho-anthropological approach to death that Buddhists undertake is also revealed in their iconography. Buddhist art appears to reflect the stance that Buddhists assert regarding conceptions of death. Indeed, there are numerous elements that can serve as points of departure for this aspect of our reflection. However, I intend to commence with a non-Buddhist image, which is connected to what has been discussed thus far concerning death in the Western world. In this world, the ritual mourning and grieving described by De Martino resonate with the psycho-social and historical-philosophical reasons that Severino has outlined pertaining to death as the absolute annihilation of being.

We are aware that imagery plays a significant role in conveying information. What we identify as the 'collective imaginary' of a given culture or system of thought is precisely the visual representation of that set of psychological, social, and cultural instances that take shape in art and remain charged with meaning therein. In Snp 3.8, we have observed how the Buddha distances himself from lamentation and grief, revealing that these attitudes, what De Martino would have referred to as "ritual mourning", are detrimental to the individual's psyche, trapping them in a repetition of suffering, a recurrence of those very instances that initially led to *dukkha*. However, the capacity not to be afflicted by grief appears to be a characteristic that only the sage, in the fullness of their mindfulness, can experience. This, at least, is what seems to emerge from the discourse in Snp 3.8.

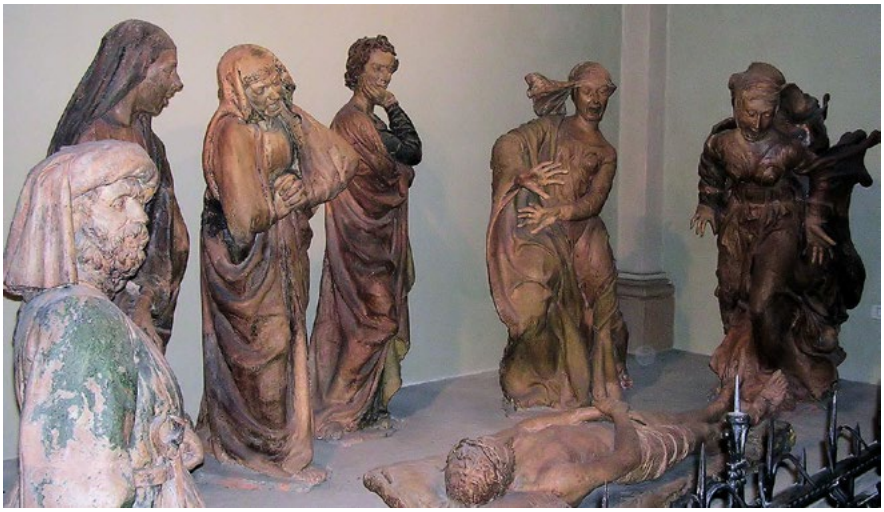

Figure 1 – Pietà Compianto sul Cristo morto di Niccolò dell'Arca. Public domain.

Now, let us turn our attention to one of the many possible works within Christianity that reveal the exaltation, if not celebration, of the act of ritual mourning. This image (figure 1) is taken from the artwork of Niccolò dell'Arca, the 'Lamentation over the Dead Christ', preserved in the Church of Santa Maria della Vita in Bologna. It is but one of the numerous possible works that we could examine in this regard. We immediately notice how the image effectively communicates the moment of grief, the despair of those who witness the death of Christ and mourn. From a Buddhist perspective, this would be seen as an unnecessary exaltation of suffering, relegated to the attitude of the unwise, distant from the state of mindfulness that transcends worldly conceptions, including the grief for the death of loved ones.

Figure 2 – Section of Buddha's Mahāparinirvāṇa, Victoria and Albert museum. In this work the emphasis is placed on the contrast between the serenity of the Buddha in a state of mindfulness and the mourning experienced by his devotees. Public Domain.

As we read in SN 6.15 about Buddha's death, his last words were "what is conditioned is destined to fall apart. You should persist with diligence" (*vayadhammā saṅkhārā, appamādena sampādethā*). Then he enters the multiple states of *jhāna* absorption, which culmination is the "cessation of perception and feeling" (*saññāvedayitanirodhaṃ samāpajji*). Once the Buddha was "fully extinguished" (*parinibbāyi*), Brahmā Sahampati, Sakka, Ānanda and Anuruddha recited some verses about the world's creatures (*bhūtā loke*), the impermanence of all conditions (*aniccā vata saṅkhārā*) and also the frightening (*bhiṃsanakaṃ*) they experience due to the Buddha's extinguishment. However, they also recognize that he was indeed happy, "unperturbed, committed to peace" (*anejo santimārabbha*).

Figure 3 – Kuṣāṇa representation of Buddha's *parinirvāṇa*. Exhibit in the Hakone Museum of Art – Hakone, Kanagawa, Japan (CC0 1.0)

The emphasis on the despair of the disciples in wanting to highlight the exaggeration of their behavior is part of the same type of psychological training that meditation aims to focus on, even in stronger emotional forms, such as meditation on impurities and what is disgusting. We have observed that Buddhism establishes a distinction between the mundane (*lokiya*, lit. "worldly") and the supramundane (*lokuttara*, lit. "over-world"). In the realm of mundanity (worldliness), psychology and socio-cultural rules apply, but these are based on the dichotomous principle of division and opposition. In the mundane, dualism exists, and everything is organized based on this psychological principle: beautiful and ugly, positive and negative, pure and impure, healthy and sick, normal and abnormal, even to the point of life and death. Dualism is particularly opposed by Buddhism, perhaps because it is recognized as the principle of control and subjugation with which Vedic authority, starting from the idea of *adhārmika* (anomy), constitutes its antagonism with all those who oppose the authority of those texts and social roles. However, Buddhist reflection goes beyond social constructs and extends to the psychological perception of individuals. If dualism is a deception, every construction based on opposition that belongs to the mundane sphere cannot exist in and of itself, as it is self-negating by definition.

Following the same principle that everything needs its conceptual opposite to be defined as such, hence it is interdependent on its opposite and therefore not a self-standing, independent truth, Buddhism recognizes in every dualistic opposition a psychological flaw, a cognitive deception. How, then, can the mind,

which is so dependent on dichotomous constructions, be trained to recognize the impermanence and non-existence of these dualisms? The method that meditation finds most effective is to reflect on these very antinomies analytically and without fear. In doing so, the Buddha, in one of the most famous and studied meditations from the ancient canon, instructs the meditator to delve into what we perceive as disgusting and impure, to confront what psychosocial education has taught us to perceive as repulsive or disgusting, to realize that it is nothing more than a mental construct, the other side of what is 'beautiful' and therefore beauty itself cannot exist without it. According to Dhammajoti, "the Buddha, while affirming the exclusive perception of the ugly or impure in the *aśubhā* practice, does not deny the practitioner's capability of the pure and beautiful"[93].

By combining the two devices of analyticity and contemplation, meditation on the impure encourages the meditator to deconstruct their own body, even visualizing their own skeleton. Here lies the aspect of analyticity, aimed at understanding that everything is interdependent and nothing stands on its own sufficiently: the body is a collection of organs, nerves, muscles, bones, just like any phenomenon that appears to us is a collection of interdependent elements and it is a complex conglomerate of factors. Likewise, these organs are something disgusting, which would normally repulse us, but the Buddha invites us to contemplate this disgust, to open the body like a sack of legumes and to reach in with our hand, touching all the viscera and 'impurities' (as we are accustomed to perceiving them) that make us up. This is because full awareness cannot avoid recognizing the inevitable: we are made of these repulsive things; they are within us. But if they are inside us, why should we feel disgust? Why, if our bodies contain these impurities, should we pretend not to see them? Of course, they are hidden beneath the skin and are not normally visible, but in their concealment, we ignore them, only to fear them when they resurface and label them as "impurities". We are afraid to touch them, but meditation brings the meditator down into these same viscera, decontextualizing the psychological construction based on the pure/impure antinomy. The meditator realizes that there is no division between the internal and the external, no reason to fear disgust, as it, like the pleasant, is nothing but a psychological construct.

> In this body there is head hair, body hair, nails, teeth, skin, flesh, sinews, bones, bone marrow, kidneys, heart, liver, diaphragm, spleen, lungs, intestines, mesentery, undigested food, feces, bile, phlegm, pus, blood, sweat, fat, tears, grease, saliva, snot, synovial fluid, urine. It's as if there were a bag with openings at both ends, filled with various kinds of grains, such as fine rice, wheat, mung beans, peas, sesame, and ordinary rice. And someone with good eyesight were to open it and examine the contents: "These grains are

93 K. L. DHAMMAJOTI, *Meditative Experiences of Impurity and Purity—Further Reflection on the aśubhā Meditation and the śubha-vimokṣa*, "Religions", 2021, 12.2, No. 86: 7. DOI: 10.3390/rel12020086.

> fine rice, these are wheat, these are mung beans, these are peas, these are sesame, and these are ordinary rice".[94]

The meditations on the impure then establish themselves as a real tradition which is further developed and carried forward even subsequently, as Mohr demonstrates in his analysis on the "Contemplation of the Impure" in the *Dámóduōluó chánjīng*[95].

In SN 46.57, the contemplative exercise centered on the meditative reflection upon a skeleton is revisited. The passage posits that the practitioner, when directing their attention towards the contemplation of skeletal imagery in conjunction with specific awakening factors—namely, mindfulness, investigation of principles, energy, rapture, tranquility, immersion, and equanimity—and executing these elements in a deliberate manner, can engender a variety of favorable outcomes. This type of meditative exercise is also paralleled by an episode described in the canon. In MN 12 is narrated a period in which the Buddha still performed radical asceticism, struggling to find the just middle way. These forms of extreme ascetic toil, then rejected as unsuccessful[96], led the practitioner to forms of deprivation and suffering that brought him closer to death, such as abstaining from eating and washing. In this episode "the Buddha's fasting had brought him to a state of extreme thinness, to the point that, by touching his belly, he was able to grasp his own backbone, now visible by the total absence of flesh, of body"[97].

The act of cultivating the perception of a skeleton (*aṭṭhi* in the texts) is depicted as a pursuit of noteworthy fruitfulness and benefit. This characterization intimates that this meditative endeavor may yield constructive results in the context of spiritual advancement or personal development.

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94 Cf. Mahāsatipaṭṭhānasutta, DN 22. Original: *puna caparaṃ, bhikkhave, bhikkhu imameva kāyaṃ uddhaṃ pādatalā adho kesamatthakā tacapariyantaṃ pūraṃ nānappakārassa asucino paccavekkhati atthi imasmiṃ kāye kesā lomā nakhā dantā taco maṃsaṃ nhāru aṭṭhi aṭṭhimiñjaṃ vakkaṃ hadayaṃ yakanaṃ kilomakaṃ pihakaṃ papphāsaṃ antaṃ antaguṇaṃ udariyaṃ karīsaṃ, pittaṃ semhaṃ pubbo lohitaṃ sedo medo assu vasā khelo siṅghāṇikā lasikā muttanti. seyyathāpi bhikkhave ubhatomukhā putoli pūrā nānāvihitassa dhaññassa, seyyathidaṃ — sālīnaṃ vīhīnaṃ muggānaṃ māsānaṃ tilānaṃ taṇḍulānaṃ. tamenaṃ cakkhumā puriso muñcitvā paccavekkheyya ime sālī ime vīhī ime muggā ime māsā ime tilā ime taṇḍulāti. evameva kho, bhikkhave, bhikkhu imameva kāyaṃ uddhaṃ pādatalā adho kesamatthakā tacapariyantaṃ pūraṃ nānappakārassa asucino paccavekkhati atthi imasmiṃ kāye kesā lomā ... pe ...muttanti. iti ajjhattaṃ vā ... pe ... evampi kho bhikkhave bhikkhu kāye kāyānupassī viharati.*

95 M. Mohr, *Advanced Contemplation of the Impure: Reflections on a Capstone Event in the Meditation Sutra*, "Religions", 2020, 11.8, No. 386. DOI: 10.3390/rel11080386.

96 G. Flood, *The asceticism of the middle way*, in "The Ascetic Self Subjectivity, Memory and Tradition", Cambridge University Press (Cambridge 2004 & 2009), chapter 5, pp. 119–143. DOI: 10.1017/CBO9780511617522.006.

97 F. Divino, *Reaching the End of the World: An Anthropological Reading of Early Buddhist Medicine and Ascetic Practices*, "Religions", 14.2, No. 249: p. 17. DOI: 10.3390/rel14020249.

Furthermore, the passage alludes to the practitioner having the potential to anticipate one of two outcomes upon successfully nurturing this perception: attaining enlightenment within their present lifetime or achieving the status of non-return. This implication signifies that the practice carries the capacity to facilitate profound spiritual realization or liberation.

Figure 4 – The Buddha represented in his most austere ascetic phase in which his emaciated body reveals his bones and even his spine. Exhibit in the Linden-Museum - Stuttgart, Germany (Public domain, CC0 1.0).

The act of developing and nurturing the perception of a skeleton is posited to lead to substantial advantage. This assertion underscores the notion that this form of meditation holds the capacity to effect significant positive transformations within the practitioner.

Additionally, the passage underscores that the contemplation of the skeletal form is conducive to evoking profound inspiration. This proposition suggests that the practice has the capacity to motivate and invigorate the practitioner along their spiritual journey. This connection with death, symbolized by the skeletal image, serves to underscore the meditator's ability to confront and transcend their fears by contemplating their own mortality as represented by the remnants of their corporeal existence.

Lastly, the passages concerning the meditation on the skeleton assert that this meditative practice culminates in the attainment of profound ease and tranquility.

This assertion implies that it can instill a sense of inner peace and serenity within the practitioner.

In sum, these kinds of meditations accentuate the transformative and spiritually enriching facets of engaging in meditative reflection upon the perception of a skeleton, especially when practiced in conjunction with the aforementioned awakening factors. It conveys the notion that this contemplative exercise has the potential to yield profound insights and foster positive metamorphoses in the practitioner's spiritual journey.

4. Mindfulness and death: transcending the 'becoming'

Returning to the issue of death within Buddhism, it becomes evident, following the aforementioned considerations on being and non-being, that the problem of death was also perceived in the Indian context as being intricately linked to the appearance of existence. In this regard, we reference Johansson's account regarding the question of "what happens to a Tathāgata in the moment of death"[98]. In the Buddha's consistent response he "denies, as always, both that he is (*hoti*), is not, and neither is, nor is not"[99].

A potent and distressing concept of death prominently figures in the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad. In its narrative, it is posited that in the beginning, there was nothing except death, which enveloped everything, and this death took the form of hunger (*naiveha kiṃcanāgra āsinmṛtyunaivedamāvṛtamāsidaśanāyayā 'śanāyā hi mṛtyustanmano 'kurutā 'tmanvi syāmiti*). It is when death desires a mind that things assume their forms. Consequently, death does not seem to represent absolute nothingness; rather, the concept of death as nothingness emerges as an adversary to the sage, who invokes the mantra: "lead me from non-being to being, from darkness to light, from death to immortality" (*asato mā sadgamaya tamaso mā jyotirgamaya mṛtyormā amṛtaṃ yamayeti…*).

Early Buddhism, in continuous alignment with ancient Indian traditions, consistently emphasized the meditator's immortality. As seen in SN 45.7: "the dissolution of cravings, hatred, delusion is what we call deathless" (*rāgakkhayo dosakkhayo mohakkhayo idaṃ vuccati amataṃ*). Although the common narrative, equating death with the annihilation of being, appears to be the most prevalent interpretation of death, it defies human common sense to assert that something becomes what it is not. When death occurs, that which was previously visible in appearance vanishes. However, more than just the physical body, which continues to be perceptible if not cremated, what truly "disappears" with death is the soul, understood as the individual's essence. It must be acknowledged that this disappearance does not necessarily correspond to a transformation from being to absolute non-being. It reintroduces the issue of the object's permanence, suggesting a belief that something existing beyond the realm of appearance ceases to exist. In the child's perspective, there is also the conviction that when the object returns to their field of vision, it regains its "being" where it was previously "non-being". This somewhat nihilistic infantile conception arises from the child's megalomania, a residue of solipsism in their unconscious awareness of being the manifesting entity. This is expressed, in its discrete appearances, as the belief that everything they see "is" while it is within their sight and "is not" when it is not. Nonetheless, the child does not genuinely perceive themselves as omnipotent,

98 The expression *Tathāgata*, literally "thus gone" is one of the most used epithets to address the Buddha.

99 R. JOHANSSON, *The Psychology of Nirvana*, cit. pp. 59-60.

despite dwelling in the omnipotence derived from their existence within the realm of supreme alterity. The mother, or the caregiver, represents true omnipotence in the eyes of the child—a figure capable of accomplishing all. This maternal certainty provides reassurance in times of darkness, comforts hunger pangs with the nurturing breast, and encompasses both loving care and the gaze that imparts assurance.

When in SN 16.12 it is asked to Mahākassapa what happened to the Buddha after his passing, the answer proceeds according to the same model of the fourfold negation that we saw at the beginning of this chapter. In essence, it is negated that:

1. The Buddha exists after death (*hoti tathāgato paraṃ maraṇā*);
2. The Buddha doesn't exist after death (*na hoti tathāgato paraṃ maraṇā*);
3. The Buddha both exists and doesn't exist after death (*hoti ca na ca hoti tathāgato paraṃ maraṇā*);
4. The Buddha neither exists nor doesn't exist after death (*neva hoti, na na hoti tathāgato paraṃ maraṇā*).

Subsequently, emphasis is placed on the fact that the Buddha's teaching concerned precisely the psychological aspects inherent to the four noble truths and therefore the methodology for overcoming *dukkha* through those truths and the unveiling of cognitive deceptions. The circle closes at this juncture. We have observed how Buddhist psychology constructs its discourse by commencing with a contemplation of the worldly order. Consequently, the meditative ascetic must strive toward the termination of the world (*lokanta*) or the ultramundane order, wherein dualities, including that of life and death, cease to exist. This substantiates the epithet of the Buddha as the "immortal" and the quadruple negation of both the world and the existence of the Buddha.

It is necessary to clear the field of a potential mistake right away. It is traditionally thought that even meditation is in fact distinguished in a *lokiya-jhāna* and a *lokuttara-jhāna*, but this division is not, as we might expect, of methodological nature, it is rather a distinction between the technique and its purpose. The term *lokuttara-(j)jhāna* is an Abhidhammic expression and, generally, the Abhidhamma it is a work that develops the *loka*/*lokuttara* distinction to an almost paroxysm, however, with specific reference to *lokuttara-jhāna*, it is a typical abhidhammic innovation that "was never meant to be used apart from the Abhidhamma itself"[100]. As mentioned above, the idea of a transcendence of the world (*lokuttara*) is typically Abhidhammic, yet it is presumable that it derives directly from the idea of *lokanta*, which we find in the earlier suttas.

In the context of the story surrounding the Buddha's attainment of enlightenment beneath the Bodhi tree, it is recounted that the demon Māra

100 B. Brahmāli, *Jhāna and Lokuttara-jjhāna*, "Buddhist Studies Review", 2007, 24.1, pp. 75–90: 89. DOI: 10.1558/bsrv.v24i1.75.

intervened in an attempt to distract him with various temptations embodied in his three daughters: boredom (*arati*), craving (*taṇhā*), and lust (*rāga*). The name of this demon, Māra, derives from the same root as the term "death". Having failed in his attempts to divert the Buddha from his meditation, and once the Buddha had achieved enlightenment (*bodhi*), it can be said that in a certain sense, the Buddha had "defeated" death, that is, he had conquered Māra.

With death defeated and illusions overcome, and attachment to ephemeral things abandoned, a fundamental question arises: What is the nature of reality? On one hand, if it is devoid of the substantiality attributed to it, can it be said that "nothing" exists, or do things, stripped of their illusory natures, dissolve into nothingness? Where do the things we release from our grasp of attachment "fall"?

The Vipallāsasutta (AN 4.49) asserts the existence of four types (*cattārome*) of cognitive misunderstanding or perversion (in the sense of *pervertō*, to turn in the wrong direction), which afflict semantics (*saññāvipallāsā*), cognition (*cittavipallāsā*), and the perception of things (*diṭṭhivipallāsā*). We can consider them as psychological deceptions. These four ambiguities consist of:

1) Believing the impermanent to be permanent (*anicce niccanti saññāvipallāso cittavipallāso diṭṭhivipallāso*);
2) Confusing suffering with happiness (*dukkhe sukhanti saññāvipallāso cittavipallāso diṭṭhivipallāso*);
3) Ascribing an identity to things that are, in fact, without a self (*anattani attāti saññāvipallāso cittavipallāso diṭṭhivipallāso*);
4) Considering the ugly to be beautiful (*asubhe subhanti saññāvipallāso cittavipallāso diṭṭhivipallāso*).

How Buddhist meditation intends to correct these misunderstandings is straightforward: by affirming the simple principle of evidence. What is impermanent cannot be permanent; what is suffering cannot be happiness; what lacks an identity cannot have an identity, and what is unpleasant cannot be pleasant. These are the corrections to be applied to the misconceptions of semantics, cognition, and perception (*nasaññāvipallāsā nacittavipallāsā nadiṭṭhivipallāsā*): one must meditate on impermanence as impermanence (*anicce aniccanti*), suffering as suffering (*dukkhe dukkhanti*), non-self as non-self (*anattani anattāti*), and, finally, ugly as ugly (*asubhe asubhanti*).

> Lastly, for those who persist in seeing permanence in impermanence, happiness in suffering, identity in the non-self, and beauty in ugliness, the text states: "Enslaved by the yoke of Death [Māra], these individuals gain nothing from this yoke. Sentient beings continue to wander, proceeding through birth and death. But when Buddhas appear in the world, they bring the Light. They shine with the light of this teaching that leads to the cessation of suffering. When a wise person listens to them, they reclaim their mind,

> seeing impermanence as impermanence, suffering as suffering, the non-self as the non-self, and ugliness as ugliness. Correcting their perception, they rise above and transcend suffering.[101]

In this discussion, the concept of identity assumes a central role. Within the Buddhist framework, the apprehension surrounding death can be partially attributed to an excessive attachment to one's identity, described anthropologically as "presence". Individuals deeply entrenched in their social, cultural, or psychological identities often derive their sense of self from these constructs, perceiving the potential dissolution of identity as tantamount to complete annihilation. In contrast, Buddhist philosophy advocates for an existence devoid of this sense of presence, offering the prospect of being without a fixed identity. Despite originating from a series of interconnected associations, individuals assimilate these internalized elements as intrinsic to themselves through internal imagery, thereby expanding their self-concept beyond these components and viewing themselves as a resultant afterimage. This characterization aligns with Buddhism's proposed understanding of psychological identity.

True fear of death is understood, from a Buddhist psychological point of view, as the fear that one's identity will cease to exist. Buddhism offers a distinctive perspective on the notion of identity, diverging fundamentally from the Western conception of an immutable, stable self. The Buddhist comprehension of identity is rooted in principles such as clinging, the appropriation of cognitive elements within the conditioned chain of production, the framework of the five aggregates, and nominal designations (initially referred to as *nāma-paññatti* in the Abhidhamma).

Clinging (*upādāna*) constitutes a pivotal facet of Buddhist psychology, occupying a place within the twelve links of dependent origination (*paṭiccasamuppāda*). It refers to the mental process of grasping and attachment to experiences, ideas, and objects. This attachment perpetuates the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth (*saṃsāra*) and fosters the illusion of an enduring and stable self or identity, which stands in contrast to the Buddhist doctrine of *anattā* (non-self).

The appropriation of cognitive elements within the conditioned production chain is integral to the Buddhist perspective. The sense of identity arises through the interaction of various cognitive elements in an ongoing cause-and-effect process. These cognitive elements, referred to as mental formations (*saṅkhāra*), encompass perception, intention, and volition. As these cognitive elements intermingle, they generate experiences and mental states, which the individual then assimilates into their perceived identity.

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101 Vipallāsasutta, AN 4.49. Original: *te yogayuttā mārassa, ayogakkhemino janā; sattā gacchanti saṃsāraṃ, jātimaraṇagāmino. yadā ca buddhā lokasmiṃ, uppajjanti pabhaṅkarā; te imaṃ dhammaṃ pakāsenti, dukkhūpasamagāminaṃ. tesaṃ sutvāna sappaññā, sacittaṃ paccaladdhā te; aniccaṃ aniccato dakkhuṃ, dukkhamaddakkhu dukkhato. anattani anattāti, asubhaṃ asubhataddasuṃ; sammādiṭṭhisamādānā, sabbaṃ dukkhaṃ upaccagun ti.*

The Buddhist concept of identity is further elucidated through the framework of the five aggregates, constituting the components of an individual's existence: form (*rūpa*), feeling (*vedanā*), perception (*saññā*), mental formations (*saṅkhāra*), and consciousness (*viññāṇa*). Buddhism asserts the absence of a permanent, unchanging self or essence underlying these aggregates; instead, the sense of identity emerges from the interdependent interplay of these elements.

Buddhism acknowledges that the attribution of identity, including psychological identities, largely results from linguistic and conceptual conventions. Nominal designations refer to the labels and classifications assigned to people, objects, and experiences, facilitating comprehension and communication. These designations are not inherent to the entities they denote but rather represent conventional constructs used to enhance communication and understanding.

In summary, Buddhism conceives of identity as a dynamic and fluid process arising from the interaction of cognitive elements, the five aggregates, and linguistic conventions. This perspective challenges the concept of a stable and enduring self, underscoring the significance of recognizing the impermanent and interconnected nature of existence.

The Buddha advocated for a contemplative practice centered on the concept of "Mindfulness of Death". This practice encourages individuals to actively engage with and acknowledge the inevitability of mortality as an inherent aspect of the human experience. Through this practice, individuals strive to attain a profound understanding of life's transient nature and the importance of embracing the present moment.

It has been posited that individuals frequently evade or deny the reality of death until it directly confronts them, such as in life-threatening situations[102]. Nevertheless, the authors contend that the early adoption of mindfulness of death can yield several advantages. It can bolster psychological and emotional preparedness for mortality, thereby diminishing the apprehension and remorse often accompanying life's culmination. Additionally, it can assist individuals in prioritizing their genuine concerns while diminishing their attachment to worldly matters.

The practice of mindfulness of death entails the sustained acknowledgment of the uncertainty surrounding the timing of one's demise and the impermanence intrinsic to all phenomena. This mindfulness can be cultivated through meditation and contemplation. For instance, individuals can engage in visualization exercises depicting the decomposition and dissolution of a cadaver, serving as a potent reminder of the impermanence inherent in both the physical body and life itself.

The authors argue that mindfulness of death can precipitate a profound shift in one's outlook on existence. It enables individuals to relinquish their attachments

102 E. Shonin & W. Van Gordon, *Mindfulness of Death*, "Mindfulness", 2014, 5, pp. 464-466. DOI: 10.1007/s12671-014-0290-6.

and embrace a more profound engagement with the present moment. They propose that this practice can contribute to personal development, psychological well-being, and an enhanced appreciation of life's fleeting nature.

In summation, mindfulness of death is portrayed as a practice that encourages individuals to honestly and openly confront the reality of their own mortality, with the ultimate aim of leading a more meaningful and authentic life.

Of particular relevance in these studies is the application thereof to Terror Management Theory (TMT), as previously alluded to[103]. As suggested by Moon, the concept of "mortality salience" (MS), denoting the conscious recognition of one's own mortality, can be effectively harnessed. MS has been a focal point of exploration within existential psychology, especially within the context of TMT. Also, TMT posits that heightened awareness of one's mortality can yield constructive shifts in one's psychological perspective, including a reevaluation of life's priorities and an intensified emphasis on interpersonal relationships.

The author underscores that the concept of awakening to the reality of death is emphasized within early Buddhism, notably within texts such as the *Maraṇasatisutta* (AN 6.19) and the *Visuddhimagga*. The specific practice of *maraṇasati*, or mindfulness of death, is prominently featured as a technique for inducing mortality awareness ("salience").

The author delves into the global dissemination of mindfulness, tracing its journey from its Indian origins to various regions worldwide, including the Western world, where it has been assimilated into medical and psychological paradigms. Specific reference is made to the utilization of "Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction" (MBSR) as an exemplar of how mindfulness has been integrated into contemporary contexts.

The author posits that mindfulness of death, with its central focus on temporality and the acknowledgment of death's inevitability, can serve as a more direct and efficacious tool for inducing mortality salience, in contrast to conventional TMT experimental techniques. Furthermore, the author presents their own research findings pertaining to the application of mindfulness of death among adolescents, suggesting its positive effects on attitudes toward life, the induction of mortality salience, and the acceptance of death.

In conclusion, the author underscores the potential benefits of mindfulness of death, including its capacity to foster a healthier acceptance of mortality and a more purposeful approach to life. The author draws parallels between the consequences of mindfulness of death and the psychological transformations observed after the induction of mortality salience in the context of TMT. Lastly, reference is made to the *Visuddhimagga*'s explication of the advantages of mindfulness of death, aligning with the positive psychological outcomes previously elucidated.

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103 H. G. Moon, *Mindfulness of Death as a Tool for Mortality Salience Induction with Reference to Terror Management Theory*, "Religions", 2019, 10.6, No. 353. DOI: 10.3390/rel10060353.

Schultz and Arnau highlight the substantial body of research centered on emotional and behavioral responses to mortality salience while underscoring the limited investigation into interventions capable of mitigating its negative repercussions[104]. They posit that mindfulness may serve as an effective mechanism for diminishing defensive reactions toward mortality-related thoughts owing to its enhancement of psychological adaptability and emotional self-regulation.

Mindfulness, defined as the purposeful and nonjudgmental observation of the present moment, has garnered considerable attention within the realm of clinical psychology. Mindfulness-based interventions have proven efficacious across diverse domains, including stress reduction and the treatment of various psychological disorders. Mindfulness affords individuals the capacity to objectively observe their thoughts and respond to them with reduced emotional intensity. It also enhances attention control, psychological flexibility, and adaptability to varied circumstances.

The authors propose that individuals possessing mindfulness skills may experience diminished distress when confronted with thoughts of mortality, resulting in fewer defensive responses to mortality salience. This study endeavors to scrutinize whether the induction of mindfulness can attenuate defensive reactions to mortality salience, potentially yielding enhanced emotional well-being and adaptability, particularly among vulnerable populations and individuals persistently grappling with mortality-related thoughts.

Within their study, the authors investigate whether a brief mindfulness induction can mitigate defensive responses incited by mortality salience, i.e., the conscious awareness of one's own mortality. They compare the defensive responses of individuals exposed to a mindfulness induction with those subjected to either a mind-wandering or worry induction. Defensive responses are assessed via three distinct measures: proximal defense mechanisms, appraised through a word fragment task wherein a higher completion rate of death-related words signifies a heightened defensive response; distal defense mechanisms, quantified through ratings of offense severity and deserved punishment on the "Mortality Salience Task Scale" (MSTS); and negative affect, evaluated utilizing the "Positive and Negative Affect Schedule" (PANAS).

The findings indicate that individuals in the worry-induction condition manifested elevated proximal defense responses and heightened levels of negative affect following the mortality salience induction when compared to those in the mindfulness and mind-wandering conditions. These latter two groups exhibited no significant differences in these domains. No significant group disparities are observed in terms of distal defensive responses.

104 D. M. Schultz & R. C. Arnau, *Effects of a Brief Mindfulness Induction on Death-Related Anxiety*. "OMEGA – Journal of Death and Dying", 2017, 79.3, pp. 313–335. DOI: 10.1177/0030222817721115.

Partial support is observed for the hypothesis positing that individuals in the mindfulness group would complete fewer death-related word fragments compared to individuals in the other groups. Although participants in the mindfulness group did indeed complete significantly fewer death-related word fragments than those in the worry group, no statistically significant difference emerged between the mindfulness and mind-wandering groups. This implies that both mindfulness and mind-wandering proved more effective than active worrying as responses to mortality salience. However, it is noted that the study cannot definitively assert whether mindfulness or mind-wandering exerts a buffering effect on these responses.

The authors further acknowledge that the absence of significant findings in relation to distal defensive responses may be attributed to the limited utilization of the MSTS measure and advocate for additional research to validate its applicability. Moreover, the potential influence of trait mindfulness (i.e., an individual's inherent disposition toward mindfulness) on responses to mortality salience is contemplated, suggesting that trait mindfulness may play a role in the efficacy of mindfulness inductions.

Furthermore, the study extends partial support for the hypothesis advancing that individuals in the mindfulness condition would report diminished levels of negative affect in response to mortality salience in comparison to individuals in other conditions. Mindfulness is identified as more effective than worrying in mitigating negative responses; however, no significant distinctions are observed between mindfulness and mind-wandering. The authors suggest that with a larger sample size, the distinctions between these conditions might attain statistical significance.

The study concludes that there exists insufficient evidence to assert that a brief mindfulness exercise surpasses simple distraction (mind-wandering) in mitigating negative defensive responses to mortality salience. Several plausible explanations for this outcome are proffered, including the notion that a brief mindfulness exercise may not induce a sufficiently elevated level of mindfulness in untrained individuals. Additionally, the authors consider the potential roles of participant motivation and effort in adhering to mindfulness instructions, hinting at the possibility that sustained mindfulness practice over time might yield more favorable results. They posit that future research could explore these factors further, possibly by comparing experienced meditators with novices.

5. Contemplation and Death Anxiety

We have seen so far that "an inverse relationship exists between meaning of life and depression, anxiety, and ontological representations of death as annihilation"[105]. Buddhist psychology does not advocate for an annihilation of the meditator, as the "Tathāgata was thought to continue existing in some form after death, as the ocean certainly exists"[106]. Rather, the Buddha exists in a state that is like the ocean. As Johansson previously explains: "The idea must be that there is some sort of similarity between the ocean and an extinct fire, possibly the homogeneity, lack of differentiation and distinguishing traits, the 'calmness' and even distribution". Nevertheless, the state of *nibbāna* can be conceived as a death-like status due to its detachment from the mundane dimension. However, what meditation really pursue is a form of psychological liberation from the dualistic constructions which generate suffering and deceptions about the world, including the belief in death as a total annihilation of the being.

> In this life the arahant of course exists in the conventional meaning and although he still has his body and even his *citta* – a *citta* in purified and 'liberated' form – he cannot be known or recognized. As a physical recognition could not be any problem, I take it to mean that his *citta* or *viññāṇa* cannot be studied or even identified by means of mind-reading (except by other arahants).[107]

Death therefore also appears as a problem regarding the falling apart of things. The Buddha recognizes that in appearance everything is in continuous transformation, but this change, duly recognized as a change of form, does not necessarily coincide with the death of one form in another. Becoming itself is rejected as an evolutionary concept (*pariṇāma*) when it is stated that it is not correct to maintain that an effect becomes from a cause, nor that an effect is an evolved form of its cause[108].

True liberation (*mokṣa*, *mokkha*) for Buddhism is therefore liberation from the anguish of nothingness, from the deception of death. Nirvāṇa in this sense is "liberation from the tyranny of the conventional (*saṃvṛti*). *Paramārthasatya* is incapable of being taught or proved, though it may be hinted at through the spoken word"[109]. Indeed, what is described in the texts as *parinirvāṇa* corresponds simply to the disintegration of the *pañcakkhandha*, that is, the psychophysical construct.

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105 I. Testoni et al., *Meaning of life, representation of death*, cit. p. 512.

106 R. Johansson, *The Psychology of Nirvana*, cit. p. 61.

107 Ibidem.

108 Y. Karunadasa, *Early Buddhist Teachings*, cit. p. 23.

109 I. C. Harris, *The Continuity of Madhyamaka and Yogācāra in Indian Mahāyāna Buddhism*, Brill (Leiden 1991): p. 115.

When the Buddha seemingly departed from this world, what he actually did was to vanish from the level of the relative and enter into the Absolute. What appeared, therefore, to those witnessing the scene in the world of conventions was a "disappearance" of the Buddha. In the DN, it is stated that the Buddha first entered four formless meditative states (*arūpa*), after which he entered a state of immanent consciousness (*viññāṇañcāyatana*), which, curiously for us, is followed by a state of nihilism (*ākiñcaññāyatana*), which, however, is not the ultimate goal. Having also transcended the nihilistic stage, the Buddha enters the stage of neither-perception-nor-non-perception (*nevasaññānāsaññāyatana*), but even this is not sufficient, as it still retains a residue of ideal-typical conceptualization. Just as the realm of Nothingness is not truly the place of non-existence but rather the realm of the idea of non-existence, the subsequent realm appears as a conceptualization, but its realization allows one to conceive how it is possible to transcend ideas through ideas themselves. Buddhism is the liberation of the human being from subordination to the ideas they themselves create. By recalling the genesis of concepts, the human being regains control over their own words, which can no longer determine their worldview. The ultimate stage, in fact, is the cessation of ideation and the sensations derived from it (*saññāvedayitanirodha*).

The examination of the intersection between death and meditation within the realm of Buddhist psychology unveils a nuanced and interconnected tapestry of themes and philosophical inquiries. At its core, this discourse revolves around the profound existential fear of mortality and the diverse mechanisms employed by individuals to grapple with this formidable challenge.

A central thematic thread that emerges pertains to the pivotal role played by spirituality and religiosity in furnishing a comprehensive framework for ascribing meaning to life, notably in the context of chronic illness or the contemplation of one's mortality. It posits that these belief systems proffer solace and a sense of purpose, thereby equipping individuals to confront the pervasive anxiety that accompanies thoughts of death. A recent study reaffirmed the significance of spirituality within the therapeutic domain by emphasizing potential correlations between meditation and spirituality, while also examining how the dissociation of these elements may impede therapeutic outcomes[110]. This investigation explores the spiritual dimensions of meditation and critically assesses the relevance of a spiritual dimension in meditative practice.

Furthermore, the concept of "death anxiety" emerges as a pervasive psychological phenomenon with transcultural and transhistorical resonance. Particularly intriguing is the transformative potential attributed to near-death experiences (NDEs), which are posited as events capable of reshaping an individual's existential perspective. The intriguing parallels drawn between NDEs,

110 C. Berghmans & A. Weiss, *The influence of the spiritual dimension as a complementary therapeutic dynamic in meditation practices and in the field of mental health*, "L'Évolution Psychiatrique", 2023, 88.2: e13-e23. DOI: 10.1016/j.evopsy.2023.03.006.

profound meditative states, and the Buddhist concept of nibbāna prompt profound contemplation regarding the ontological nature of these encounters with the transcendent.

Figure 5 – The Buddha's *parinirvāṇa*. Museum für Asiatische Kunst, Berlin (CC0 1.0).

From a philosophical vantage point, this inquiry delves into the ruminations of ancient luminaries such as Plato and Aristotle, who proffered the notion that genuine knowledge, encapsulated within the concept of episteme and fortified by dialectical reasoning, could serve as a metaphoric shield against the existential dread of mortality. These philosophical constructs proffer insights into the perennial human quest to grapple with, understand, and ultimately transcend the paralyzing fear of death.

Additionally, this discourse underscores the evolution of monotheistic religions and their theological interpretations. These religious frameworks have sought to elucidate the nature of an eternal Absolute Being and the existence of an immortal soul, thereby providing potential answers to the enigmatic questions surrounding death and human identity.

In a contemporary context, empirical research emerges as a critical dimension of this discourse. Empirical findings illuminate the potential of mindfulness practices to mitigate death anxiety by fundamentally reshaping individuals' perceptions of mortality while concurrently bolstering self-esteem and mindfulness. These empirical insights contribute substantially to the ongoing exploration of how meditation and mindfulness, within the context of Buddhist psychology, offer a means to address the universal dread of death.

Lastly, the narrative of the Buddha's enlightenment, epitomized by his confrontation with the malevolent entity known as Māra, assumes a symbolic significance within this context. It serves as a poignant illustration of the transformative capacity of meditation and spiritual awakening to transcend the omnipresent fear of death. It suggests that through profound internal metamorphosis, individuals possess the potential to transcend or even conquer their innate apprehensions concerning mortality.

In summation, the confluence of death and meditation within the domain of Buddhist psychology constitutes a multidimensional and intellectually intricate inquiry. It encompasses elements of spirituality, philosophy, psychology, and empirical investigation, collectively underscoring the profound complexity intrinsic to the human condition. This discourse reveals the enduring human quest to discover meaning and surmount the existential dread of death. While it provides captivating insights and identifies intriguing parallels across diverse experiences, it also emphasizes the perpetual nature of this profound exploration within the ambit of Buddhist thought and practice. Thus, it beckons for continued research and contemplation, challenging scholars to delve deeper into these intricate connections and their profound implications for the human understanding of life and mortality.

The distinctive aspect characterizing the Buddhist approach to the idea of death is that of cognitive illusion. Despite death being depicted in many contexts as something deplorable, sorrowful, causing anguish and desolation to those experiencing it (*ekapuggalassa, bhikkhave, kālakiriyā bahuno janassa anutappā hoti*, AN 1.173), the Buddha is also regarded as the one who has transcended the state of mortality. Immortality, however, does not imply perpetual life nor dissolution into nothingness. It is a complex theme challenging to articulate, which can be understood more simply as the "absence of death" (*amata*). However, this condition also implies transcending its dual opposite, namely the concept of life (*jīva*), which is conceived and managed within specific 'power' systems that today we define as culture or society. Consequently, death is a conception, a semantic construct, not a real risk. Yet, life, ultimately, is what, if not describable by an attributed identity, by the name "life"? This label, affixed to the "living beings", makes them part of a group that inevitably opposes another, that of the non-living, the soulless (*ajīva*). Buddhism, avoiding these two extremes, also rejects these categorizations. In other words, it does not presume to decide what life is and what

death is but demands transcending both states. Hence, "those who do not enjoy mindfulness of the body do not enjoy the absence of death" (*amataṃ te, bhikkhave, na paribhuñjanti ye kāyagatāsatiṃ na paribhuñjanti*, AN 1.616). Here lies the apparent contradiction: body and absence of death (*kāya*, *amata*). Furthermore (1.627), "one who achieves mindfulness of the body attains liberation from death" (*amataṃ tesaṃ, bhikkhave, sacchikataṃ yesaṃ kāyagatāsati sacchikatā*). However, this same mindfulness of the body requires the meditator to focus on the decomposition of the body, its viscera, and the most repulsive aspects of the putrefaction of their limbs, to induce recognition that their existence transcends the body, just as it transcends identity. Yet, that body, the very same body from which we detach ourselves with the disgust of putrefaction (SN 46.57 or DN 22, among others), is the site where the presence of this existence appears: "oh mendicants, when mindfulness of death is developed and cultivated, it is truly beneficial and fruitful, culminating in liberation from death and the end of death" (*maraṇassati, bhikkhave, bhāvitā bahulīkatā mahapphalā hoti mahānisaṃsā amatogadhā amatapariyosānā*, AN 6.19 & 8.73).

6. Life and Death, Saṃsāra and Nibbāna?

Based on the discussion thus far, it is quite evident that the concept of *saṃsāra*, denoting the 'flow' of mundanity and the imprisonment which subjectivities are exposed to in the continuous cycle of deaths and rebirths, is what Buddhists seek to 'escape' or 'liberate' themselves from. This quest for liberation is the fundamental aim of the ascetic practice they propose. However, it is not clear whether this escape, being an escape from the continual reiteration of forms-of-life, is thus a form of death. Some have argued that since Buddhism views the cycle of deaths and rebirths as a prison, 'death' as conventionally understood, at least in the Indian culture of the time, is not a 'true death' but a form of transition from one life to another. Therefore, the pursuit of *nibbāna*, that is, liberation from this condition, can be understood in all respects as a form of 'true death', a 'definitive death' without return.

Nevertheless, as discussed in the second chapter, the issue of *nibbāna* is much more complex. It is apparent that the problem Buddhism focuses on is a perceptual one, concerning subjugation to bodily limitations that are not insurmountable and thus need to be overcome. These limitations are primarily concentrated on the dichotomous mechanisms that create the illusion of duality, including the antinomy of the concepts of life and death. Transcending this dualism would imply going not only 'beyond life' but also, and more importantly, 'beyond death'. Indeed, the Buddha is never described as 'dead' nor as 'definitively dead', but as "plunging into the deathless" (*amataṃ vigayha*). This is the truly great theme of archaic Buddhism. However, what is meant by this state of total absence of death remains to be understood.

The transcendence of death is something that goes hand in hand with the transcendence of worldliness. It is within the world that names and forms, dichotomous organizations of reality such as positive and negative, life and death, persist. With the institution of life and death, there are also established bodies responsible for controlling these institutions. Life is an institution governed by 'economic' forces that implement the principle of valorization to organize them[111].

All the 'values' that are established for the purpose of this economic organization of life are merely conventional concepts serving the purpose of acting as organizing 'forces'. However, beyond their conventional designations, they are neither autonomous nor self-sufficient. The mutual interdependence of every concept, the fact that no A can exist without a B and vice versa, demonstrates that reality is not composed of discrete, independent entities but of an interdependent network of phenomena. These phenomena are manifestations of a single reality, which we simply do not perceive in its totality, in its infinite entirety. We perceive it in sections, within the limited circles of our perception, and we 'section' and

111 E. De Martino, *The End of the World*, p. 75.

'organize' it according to our convenience, with conventional designations that construct the semantic network of concepts to which we assign values useful to the prevailing socio-cultural order in the historical reality of the moment.

Beyond these designations, the concepts do not stand alone; they are like bubbles, ready to burst at any moment, like foam, mirages—what the Buddha described as deceptions of the lord of death, Māra. Since death, like life, is a designated value, adherence to this 'world', to this limited circle of reality, places us under the yoke of Māra (*yogayuttā mārassa*). The foundation of this yoke lies precisely in perceptual, cognitive, and opinion distortions (*saññāvipallāsā cittavipallāsā diṭṭhivipallāsā*, AN 4.9). One who has broken free from the yoke of the lord of death (*abhibhuyya mārasaṃyogaṃ*) is no longer bound to the repetitive cycle of lives (*na gacchanti punabbhavanti*, Snp 3.12), that is, *saṃsāra*. However, this end of the repetition of lives is not death. All this suffering, which is intrinsic to our worldly circle, in the valorized and instituted life, originates from consciousness (*yaṃ kiñci dukkhaṃ sambhoti, abbaṃ viññāṇapaccayā*). When contemplation ceases the mechanism of cognitive deceptions, suffering also ceases (*viññāṇassa nirodhena, natthi dukkhassa sambhavo*). To summarize this doctrine,

> Knowing that this form is like foam,
> Understanding that it is just a mirage,
> And cutting off Māra's blossoming,
> Vanish from the King of Death.[112]

Another factor that perpetuates the illusion of life and death is identity, which, like all other constructs, is of a similarly complex yet conventional and impermanent nature. Buddhism frequently addresses the various forms of identity, ranging from self-perception and social identity to externally attributed identities, in the same manner, as all forms of identity are fundamentally conventional. These identities are grounded in processes of designation and attribution, as well as the fundamental principles of name and form. Although socially attributed and subjectively perceived identities are shaped by more intricate socio-cultural mechanisms and processes, they do not differ in their essential nature from the nominal and conventional identities of objects that populate our "worlds", such as the identities of "tree", "house", "fire" and so forth. The elements constituting these formal identities are an assemblage of factors referred to as "psychophysical aggregates", which are recognized as being of five fundamental types. When these aggregates combine and manifest collectively at specific moments, they give rise to the appearance of the conventionally designated identity associated with that particular group of aggregates.

112 Original: *pheṇūpamaṃ kāyamimaṃ viditvā, marīcidhammaṃ abhisambudhāno; chetvāna mārassa papupphakāni, adassanaṃ maccurājassa gacche.* Cf. Dhp 56, Pupphavaggo.

In the *Dhammapada*, it is stated that "nothing is as burdensome as the psychophysical aggregates" (*n'atthi khandhādisā dukkhā*). Indeed, early Buddhism identified these "aggregates" (*khandha*) as the source of all suffering.

Figure 6 – Gandhāran representation of Buddha's Mahāparinirvāṇa. Exhibit in the John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art - Sarasota, Florida, USA. Public domain (CC0 1.0).

The constitution of these aggregates is closely related to subjective perception of the world, life experiences, education, biology, and psychology. Thus, the Buddha's comprehensive anthropology identified a specific psychophysical framework composed of a series of elements whose coexistence contributes to forming a person's identity, behavior, and social individuality. Identifying with this construction is a source of suffering, as it does not reflect the truth of the individual but rather represents a construct, a set of factors that shape and determine one's attitudes and dispositions in the world. The enlightened individual dismantles this construct, refrains from identifying with it, and instead recognizes the elements that comprise it. This is the "ego", the construct with which we identify, take seriously, become attached to, remember, and upon which we build[113].

This inevitably brings us back to the theme of becoming. It is a seductive error to interpret Buddhism as a doctrine that accepts and affirms the becoming of things as truth, emphasizing their constant transformation into something else. What

113 R. JOHANSSON, *The Dynamic Psychology of Early Buddhism*, p. 167.

causes *dukkha*—discomfort, distress, suffering—is not the inescapable reality of becoming, but the belief in becoming. This is quite apparent upon a closer examination of the assertions made by major Buddhist thinkers. However, it was necessary for Severino to provide the West with the conceptual and philosophical tools to fully comprehend these Buddhist assertions, which were often misunderstood when left to Euro-Atlantic interpretation.

Becoming is certainly perceived as reality, and this perception materializes as a threat in the minds of those who believe in the destruction of the being of things, including their identity, which arises from the simultaneous co-presence of multiple factors, as we have seen. Rather than promoting a belief in the inevitability of becoming, Buddhism encourages a deep understanding of the true nature of what we consider phenomena, death, and the world. Suffering arises from misunderstanding and from clinging to things that are ultimately misinterpretable. These things are destined to disappear just as they appeared. Yet, in their disappearance, we perceive them as being lost to nothingness, and this perception fuels the anguish of the world's disintegration (*lokanta*), which then dominates us.

In the vast landscape of Buddhist philosophy, it is undoubtedly Nāgārjuna who addresses the theme of being and non-being in the most radical and rigorous manner. This theme is, in fact, present—beyond any reasonable doubt—in the majority of Indian philosophical traditions, although some Eurocentric scholars deny that India has ever engaged with such philosophical issues. However, in Nāgārjuna's work, the precision with which these matters are treated is so thorough that it paradoxically gives rise to certain challenges. The most famous of his thought-provoking assertions is that *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* are actually one and the same, for no difference can be found between them (MK 25.19-20).

Nāgārjuna has been erroneously attributed with nihilistic, pessimistic, and even materialistic views. Yet, not only is Buddhist philosophy not nihilistic, contrary to what certain interpretations may suggest, but it is also fundamentally opposed to any notion that posits the incoherent possibility of the non-being of being. It is through an awareness of human cognitive mechanisms that Nāgārjuna's rigorous teachings demonstrate that being, in its absolute sense, has nothing to do with the idea of being that we cognitively oppose to the idea of nothingness, which, evidently, cannot manifest as a possibility.

> A being does not arise from another being. A being does not arise from a non-being. A non-being does not arise from a non-being. A non-being does not arise from a being. A being neither arises from itself, nor from something other than itself, nor simultaneously from itself and something else. How, then, can it come into existence?[114]
>
> (MK 21.12-13)

114 Original: *na bhāvāj jāyate bhāvo bhāvo 'bhāvān na jāyate; nābhāvāj jāyate 'bhāvo 'bhāvo bhāvān na jāyate; na svato jāyate bhāvaḥ parato naiva jāyate; na svataḥ parataś caiva jāyate jāyate kutaḥ.*

This rhetorical question posed by Nāgārjuna does not suggest the possibility that being is equivalent to nothingness, as the initial statement (a being does not arise from another being nor from non-being) already refutes this hypothesis. Therefore, Nāgārjuna's path is not nihilistic. On the contrary, by questioning how a being can come into existence after demonstrating the impossibility of it arising either from another being or from non-being, Nāgārjuna subtly introduces the reader to the inherent truth of being itself—namely, that being simply is; it does not come into being, it is not born (and thus, does not die).

> Nāgārjuna had already rejected the possibility that things — meaning *dharma*s, of course — that never arose should pass away. *Sarvasarvātmakatvavāda*, viewed in this light, would have developed under the influence, this time indirect, of the correspondence principle. This principle rules out the possibility of something non-existent arising. And without arising, there is no passing away.[115]

In his works, Nāgārjuna could not be more explicit: it is the act of naming that creates the impression of substantiality (having an intrinsic nature), which in this context should be understood as the perception of the independence of entities. To assert that an entity, by virtue of being nameable, is intrinsically itself, and that it exists without the need to rely on the landscape of entities that populate the nominal entities (the inventory of signs within a language), is at the core of the nominalist illusion. When Nāgārjuna states that a certain event or thing does not exist (*nāsti*), he does not mean that it is nothingness (*abhāva*), but rather that it does not present itself to appearance: "it is not there" (*na-asti*). The "middle way" proposed by Nāgārjuna lies between the presence (*asti*) and absence (*nāsti*) of truth, that is, beyond the conception that truth is deemed true when it appears and false when it does not. This is evident from an objection that Nāgārjuna addresses in his "Destruction of Wrong Views" (*Vigrahavyāvartanī*), where he gathers various critiques of his philosophy and then demonstrates their lack of foundation.

> If things were devoid of intrinsic nature, then even the definition of "absence-of-intrinsic-nature" would not arise, for no name can be given in the absence of a referent object.[116]
>
> (Vigrahavyāvartanī 9)

Nāgārjuna's endeavor is arguably the most complex that a human being has ever undertaken: to deconstruct language using language itself. This represents the

115 J. BRONKHORST, *Language and Reality: On an Episode in Indian Thought*, Brill (Leiden 2011): 55. DOI: 10.1163/ej.9789004204355.i-170.

116 Original: *kiṃ cānyat yadi ca na bhavet svabhāvo dharmāṇāṃ niḥsvabhāva ity eva; nāmāpi bhaven naivaṃ nāma hi nirvastukaṃ nāsti.*

only possible way to transcend the limitations of linguistic expression and glimpse the absolute through words, without these words becoming an expressive constraint.

Nāgārjuna aims to highlight that every nominal existence is constituted solely by the convention that assigns meaning to that entity, but none of these conventions can definitively capture the absolute, understood as the ultimate truth of things. At most, one can invoke appearances, but none of these appearances are more than nominal existents. The issue arises when nominal existence is substantialized and perceived as absolute. Nāgārjuna's challenge, then, is to demonstrate that no objective reality exists that is inhabited by the pluralities we continuously name. When two or more people agree that there is something before them that they call a "tree", they might be persuaded that the existence of that tree describes an objective reality, valid independently of their intersubjective conventions. In reality, that tree does not exist objectively, nor can it be said to be nothing. The tree exists as a nominal entity, but it is given only within our intersubjective convention. It is empty of any intrinsic nature that would allow it to be different from mere being, that is, to exist as an object independent of the conventional factors that describe it.

> It is impossible for something to exist and simultaneously be devoid of conditions. If it were nonexistent, what would it condition? If it were existent, why would it require conditions? When things cannot be conceived as either existent, nonexistent, or both, how could one speak of establishing their causes? Such a proposition would be impossible. An existent phenomenon is clearly recognized as lacking any object. If the phenomenon were devoid of an object, how could the object exist?[117]
>
> (MK 1.6-8)

What might be termed oppositional dualism is a deception of the mind. This is recognized not only in Buddhist philosophy. For instance, Severino speaks of "that abstract separation that posits being and the determinate as two absolutes, as two absolutely unreal places", and he further adds that "this abstract separation is the way in which Western thought has never ceased to conceive of being and the determination of being—that is, it is the way in which it has never ceased to conceive of the entity, if the entity is the synthesis of being and determination"[118].

A powerful and unsettling notion of death dominates the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*. In the beginning, it is said, there was nothing but death that enveloped

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117 Original: *naivāsato naiva sataḥ pratyayo 'rthasya yujyate; asataḥ pratyayaḥ kasya sataś ca pratyayena kim; na san nāsan na sad asan dharmo nirvartate yadā; kathaṃ nirvartako hetur evaṃ sati hi yujyate; anārambaṇa evāyaṃ san dharma upadiśyate; athānārambaṇe dharme kuta ārambaṇaṃ punaḥ.*

118 E. SEVERINO, *Essenza del Nichilismo*, Adelphi (Milan 1982): 71.

everything, and this death was hunger[119]. It is when death desires to obtain a mind that things take form from it. Death thus does not appear to be a nothingness, but the idea of death as nothingness appears to be the enemy of the sage, who recites this mantra: "from non-being lead me to being, from darkness lead me to light, from death lead me to immortality" (*asato mā sadgamaya tamaso mā jyotirgamaya mṛtyormā amṛtaṃ yamayeti...*).

Early Buddhism, in perfect continuity with the oldest Indian traditions, has always emphasized the necessity of the meditator's immortality. As we also read in SN 45.7: "the dissolution of lust, of hatred, of delusion, is what we call immortality" (*rāgakkhayo dosakkhayo mohakkhayo idaṃ vuccati amataṃ*).

It is usually said that "things die and 'after' death, there is nothing". Although this narrative and the consequent equation of death with the annihilation of being may seem to be the most popular versions of the concept of death, it defies every form of human common sense to assert that something becomes what it is not. When death occurs, what was previously visible to the senses disappears, but more than the mere physical body—which, if not cremated, continues to appear—what truly 'disappears' with death is the soul, understood as the essence of the individual. Regarding this disappearance, it cannot be said that it corresponds to a transformation of being into supreme non-being. This is reminiscent of the problem of the object permanence of the infant, who believes that something, once it leaves the field of appearance, ceases to exist. Yet, in the child, there is also the conviction that upon the reappearance of the object in the visual field, the object returns to 'being' where it was previously in nothingness. This infantile nihilistic conception arises due to the child's megalomania, a solipsistic remnant of the unconscious awareness that they are the being that manifests, which translates, in their modest perceptions, into the conviction that everything they see exists, while if it is not visible, then it is not.

Rejecting both eternalism (*śāśvatadṛṣṭi*) and nihilism (*ucchedavāda*), Buddhist thinkers seem to adopt a position that denies the eternity of being in a temporal sense. However, it is crucial to clarify that the eternalism they reject pertains to temporal eternity, which posits the absolute truth of the conventional. In contrast, the atemporal eternity of ultimate Truth should not be understood as something that persists over time, but rather as something that has never been born and will never die.

Beyond the absoluteness of being, of being-as-such, Nāgārjuna's *tattva* posits that forms and representations of being, which constitute the world we experience, manifest within the totality, and these are the *dharmas*. When Mahāyāna, following the Madhyamaka revolution, declares the emptiness of all *dharmas*, it does not do so to argue that they are destined for non-being or that they are

119 *naiveha kiṃcanāgra āsinmṛtyunaivedamāvṛtamāsidaśanāyayā 'śanāyā hi mṛtyustanmano 'kurutā 'tmanvi syāmiti.*

nothing. The *dharmas* do indeed appear and are perceived, but we misunderstand their true nature, as they are impermanent.

The phenomena that arise due to their influence are products of convention, and similarly, although they are part of the whole, individual *dharmas* are not the whole itself, nor are they separate from each other. The mistaken belief that a law or phenomenon has an identity that dominates others leads to the assumption that the laws of nature or the facts we experience are permanent, when in fact they adhere strictly to mutual interdependence. Every element of the whole can only exist as part of the whole and cannot exist independently or separately from others. Just as every identity is defined by its opposition to all other identities (a = a) only if (a ≠ ~a), it is similarly impossible for a *dharma* to exist without any other *dharma* to which it is opposed. Nāgārjuna, who more than anyone else has returned to the original teachings of early Buddhism, expresses this concept by asserting that a nature identity (*svabhāva*) can never exist (precisely because of interdependence), but this does not mean that identity does not exist. The idea of being (*bhāva*) also supports that of non-being (*abhāva*), just as a nature identity is sustained by otherness (*parabhāva*).

> The impossibility of any entity existing without another entity necessarily links every part to the Whole and to every other part. Through this connection, every entity exists and possesses its meaning only as it is connected to all other entities. Being with all other entities, none excluded, belongs to the essence of every entity. The part exists within the Whole not accidentally but necessarily: neither can the part leave the Whole, annihilating itself, nor can the Whole cease to exist, thereby ceasing to encompass it.[120]

However, if truth is ultimate and immutable, then its aspects are in some sense also eternal, and their becoming, *bhāva*, is merely a misunderstanding of their true nature (*yathā-bhūtaṃ*). How, then, can one demonstrate that things are both impermanent and yet not subject to becoming? Emptiness is not a nihilistic teaching. The *śūnya* is not a "nothingness", but rather an ephemeral reality that reveals the true nature of things, previously perceived incorrectly.

In his work, Nāgārjuna addresses the problem of becoming within the context of the composite (*saṃskṛta*). A "composite" is, by definition, something made (*kṛta*) by putting together (*saṃ-*) several things. How does a composite come into being? Nāgārjuna observes that what becomes is always the product of a composite. Severino noted that wood turning into ash implies the nihilistic assertion that the wood becomes something it is not: first a nothingness, from which the ash then emerges. Nāgārjuna, however, would point out that the presence of fire is also necessary for the wood to become ash. Just as a seed becomes a tree through the

120 E. SEVERINO, *Destino della Necessità*, cit. p. 114.

presence of water and sunlight. But the reasoning arrives at conclusions similar to those of Severino. Can something become what it is not? These passages of Nāgārjuna clarify the issue:

> If production, duration, and cessation imply a secondary aspect of the composite, we would observe an infinite regress. Conversely, they would not be composites.[121]
> (MK 7.3)

Accepting the critics' objection, which states (7.8) that "just as a lamp simultaneously illuminates itself and what is other than itself, similarly, production would produce two things, which would be simultaneously itself and other than itself" (*pradīpaḥ svaparātmānau saṃprakāśayate yathā*, *utpādaḥ svaparātmānāv ubhāv utpādayet tathā*), Nāgārjuna responds (7.9-11): "Darkness does not exist in the lamp, nor where it is located. What, then, would the lamp illuminate? Light, after all, is the disappearance of darkness. Is a lamp that is lighting up? But how could it eliminate darkness given that, while it is lighting up, it does not come into contact with the darkness itself? And if we were to suppose that darkness is dispelled by the lamp without there being contact between the two, then the lamp, placed in a given location, would also dispel the darkness of the entire world" (*pradīpe nāndhakāro 'sti yatra cāsau pratiṣṭhitaḥ, kiṃ prakāśayate dīpaḥ prakāśo hi tamovadhaḥ; katham utpadyamānena pradīpena tamo hatam, notpadyamāno hi tamaḥ pradīpaḥ prāpnute yadā; aprāpyaiva pradīpena yadi vā nihataṃ tamaḥ, ihasthaḥ sarvalokasthaṃ sa tamo nihaniṣyati*).

Given that what appears to us as becoming, which produces things through the interaction of other things, does not bring anything into existence from nothingness, and given the implication in this evidence that what appears to us as production is actually a sequence of the whole, which is not dynamic but merely revealing, Nāgārjuna declares the production and its process to be quieted (*śāntam*).

> If, in any place in the world, something were to occur without being produced, then it could indeed arise. However, since such a thing does not occur, what could possibly become of it? […]
> Production, whether applied to that which already exists, that which does not exist, or both simultaneously, is untenable, as we have demonstrated.[122]
> (MK 7.17, 20)

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121 Original: *utpādasthitibhaṅgānām anyat saṃskṛtalakṣaṇam, asti ced anavasthaivaṃ nāsti cet te na saṃskṛtāḥ.*

122 Original: *utpādasthitibhaṅgānām anyat saṃskṛtalakṣaṇam, asti ced anavasthaivaṃ nāsti cet te na saṃskṛtāḥ; sataś ca tāvad utpattir asataś ca na yujyate, na sataś cāsataś ceti pūrvam evopapāditam.*

In early Buddhism, the *khandha*s constitute the psychological construct of a person, understood holistically, without distinction between body and mind. It is noteworthy how Buddhists conceive of birth as *khandhānaṃ patubhāvo*, the appearance of factors[123]. For Buddhists, it is the realm of appearances that must be comprehended to liberate oneself from the deceptions it imposes on weak minds. Death is nothing more than the condition in which these factors no longer appear together. The disintegration of the factors is conceived as death, but a certain factor or form appears to our cognition only because we conceive of it as such. This does not mean that phenomena are "nothing", but rather that their true nature is not as it appears. When something that occurs solely by virtue of the interdependence of multiple factors loses this condition, it ceases to occur and seemingly no longer exists; however, even before, it existed only in appearance.

Thus, nothing truly dies and nothing is truly born (*na jāyate mriyate*). This is also clearly stated by Nāgārjuna in his critical examination of the composite (*saṃskṛta parīkṣā*). At the end of the stanza, Nāgārjuna demonstrates how the ideas of becoming and permanence are both unsustainable, implicitly concluding that things neither become nor are born but simply exist in an atemporal manner. The production of a being destined to annihilate itself, as well as the production of a being that will not be annihilated, are both impossible to sustain (MK 7.21). No form of becoming can be sustained, whether that which brings a being into existence from nothing to exist forever from that moment forward or that which brings forth a being destined to non-existence. Being neither becomes, arises, nor ceases.

Furthermore, Nāgārjuna notes that if a being possessed duration, it could only exist within a specific time, as a being begins when its duration passes, and it does not endure if its time has elapsed (7.22). However, a being that is destined for annihilation (i.e., a being that will cease to exist) is a logical impossibility. On the other hand, if we believe that it possesses duration, a being is constantly annihilating itself (7.23). The resolution lies in freeing oneself from the illusion of duration: duration, Nāgārjuna asserts, cannot logically endure, neither by means of another duration nor by sustaining itself (7.25). Similarly, a being cannot annihilate itself, whether it has not yet been annihilated, has already been annihilated, or is thought to be destined for annihilation. This is because, from the outset, being was not born, and if being is not born, Nāgārjuna asks (7.26), how can we think it could annihilate itself before being born? The annihilation of a being that persists is a contradiction. The annihilation of a being that has not begun to exist is likewise a contradiction (7.27). We never witness a state annihilating itself, nor being annihilated by another state (7.28). The verdict is definitive (7.30): "The annihilation of what exists is impossible. Indeed, existence (as an affirmation of being) and [the affirmation of] non-existence both refer to one and the same being and are thus illogical" (*sataś ca tāvad bhāvasya nirodho nopapadyate, ekatve na hi*

123 R. JOHANSSON, *The Dynamic Psychology of Early Buddhism*, p. 221.

bhāvaś ca nābhāvaś copapadyate). To comment on this passage, we may appropriately cite Parmenides, who, like Nāgārjuna, asserts that what is cannot possibly not be (ἡ μὲν ὅπως ἔστιν τε καὶ ὡς οὐκ ἔστι μὴ εἶναι)[124].

Production (becoming), duration (and time with it), and cessation (annihilation) are, according to Nāgārjuna, akin to a conjuror's trick, a dream, a city inhabited by supernatural beings (7.34). The same nature applies to the human psyche. The so-called psychic construct, whose identity represents the external manifestation, is the obstacle to the freedom of true being that Buddhists oppose.

For Buddhism, freedom is freedom from the cognitive deceptions enacted by consciousness. More broadly, then, freedom is the condition of the awakened one, who has abolished all contradiction, all duality (*advaita*), and is no longer a victim of the cognitive world, but rather free to be in any world and manner he desires, as he is no longer bound or conditioned by craving, material desire, or the suffering that follows the loss of these illusory things.

In early Buddhism, the figure who attains the state of "purification" from the unconscious subjection to the psychophysical factors that determine his personality is that of the *arahant*, the "worthy" man. In Johansson's translation: *arahaṃ khīnāsavo vusitavā katakaraṇīyo ohitabhāro anuppattasadattho parikkhīṇabhavasaṃyojano sammadaññāvimutto*, "Whatever monk is an arahant, free from obsessions, who has lived the life, done what was to be done, laid down the burden, attained his ideal, whose fetters of becoming are destroyed, who is freed by the highest knowledge"[125]. In my view, there are three key words in Johansson's translation choice that deserve further analysis: becoming, freedom, and knowledge.

For Buddhism, the issue is rather one of free will: where nothing happens by chance, but neither is what happens to us determined by wills external to our

124 This appears to be a philosophical topos common not only to Parmenides but also, surprisingly, to Hippocratic medical literature, which, contrary to what one might expect, was concerned with ontology, and indeed, primarily so. We encounter a statement almost identical to that of Parmenides in Περὶ Διαίτης 1.4: "no thing whatsoever perishes, nor comes something into being that has not beem there before, for things only change always through coagulation and dissipation" (ἀπόλλυται μέν νυν οὐδὲν ἁπάντων χρημάτων, οὐδὲ γίνεται, ὅ τι μὴ καὶ πρόσθεν ἦν· συμμισγόμενα δὲ καὶ διακρινόμενα ἀλλοιοῦται). Furthermore, in a previous work, I specifically addressed the ontological problem in early Buddhism, concluding that the positions expressed in the Pāli canon are remarkably similar to those found in Parmenides' Περὶ Φύσεως, fragment 2, which we have just examined (cf. F. DIVINO, *What Dawned First: Early Buddhist Philosophy on the Problem of Phenomenon and Origin in a Comparative Perspective*, "Philosophies", 2024, 9.5, No. 135, pp. 1-20. DOI: 10.3390/philosophies9050135). The presence of ontological reflection in Greek medical literature, which opens up the broader possibility of viewing these intellectual traditions as encompassing reflections on 'life' (in the sense of βίος) and, correspondingly, on 'death', is well known to scholars of Hippocrates (Cf. C. ENACHE, *Ontology and Meteorology in Hippocrates' On Regimen*, "Mnemosyne", 2018, 72.2, pp. 173–196. DOI: 10.1163/1568525X-12342497). In Buddhism, we observe a very similar attitude, as I will further elucidate with regard to conceptions of life and death as antinomies situated within a sociocultural context.

125 R. JOHANSSON, *The Psychology of Nirvana*, cit. p. 57.

consciousness, we cannot speak of total determinism or total free will. We are indeed unaware of what we predestine ourselves to, yet we have nonetheless willed it. Freedom, however, is something much deeper, which for the Buddha corresponds with the transcendence of all dualistic contradiction. The Buddhist tradition, in fact, never understands freedom in an external sense, although monastic life was structured to obtain the maximum external freedom. When he defines *nibbāna* as freedom, he attributes freedom to the *citta*.

The enemies of freedom are, according to Buddhism, primarily wrong ideas about the world and about ourselves, which cling to the world and to rebirth in it, immoral and compulsive habits, laziness, desires and emotions, fears, and apprehensions. These can be overcome either through understanding (*paññā*) or through meditation, or preferably both.

The Buddhist conception of death is directly related to the issue of being and nothingness, while also being closely tied to the problem of cognition. Within the Pāli Canon, phrases like "unborn" (*ajāta*) and "immortal" (*amata*) frequently describe those who have attained Buddhahood, signifying a state free from the bondage of birth and death.

Nāgārjuna recognizes that for something to be real (*sadbhūtam*), it would need to be permanent, not subject to any change or alteration, and thus it should exist as an eternal and independent being. In his analysis, the Indian philosopher clearly demonstrates that in our conception of the world, there exists the possibility that a being (*bhāva*) may become a non-being (*abhāva*), that the laws (*dharma*) are mutable and not eternal. This led many Western commentators to view Nāgārjuna as a nihilist.

The fact is that Nāgārjuna merely notes that this idea—that the being of things becomes nothing—is fundamentally our conviction of the world and what appears to us. Furthermore, Nāgārjuna points out the inconsistency in the human sciences, which are based on the axiom that things possess an inherent identity (*svabhāva*), whereas everything testifies to the interdependence of entities, thereby supporting a lack of intrinsic identity.

This does not mean, however, that this condition of emptiness (*śūnyatā*) of entities coincides with their being nothingness. Nāgārjuna is very clear in warning the reader against any nihilistic interpretation of his philosophy. Thus, any such interpretation by many commentators is due to a complete misunderstanding or inattention.

It is crucial to pay attention to what Nāgārjuna says: the things we perceive as separate and that we identify as different, endowed with independent identities from one another by virtue of this distinction, are revealed as non-independent: their identity depends on and is defined by their mutual opposition, and therefore, it is not an independent identity. Consequently, they do not possess an intrinsic nature (*niḥsvabhāva*), and thus it cannot be said that things are as we perceive them. This is the fundamental point of Nāgārjuna. In no way does this reasoning

lead to nihilistic conclusions. The "what-is" (*tattva*) of things is in no case identified with nothingness (*abhāva*), but it is equally true that the very perception of things is mediated by an unconscious projection (*prapañca*) that greatly distorts cognition. Nāgārjuna opposes the position of those he calls nihilists (*ucchedavāda*), for whom if something no longer appears, it literally does not exist (*nāsti*), meaning it has been destroyed (*uccheda*).

7. Ancient Buddhist attitudes towards Death and Life

In De Martino's anthropological theory, the dichotomy between nature and culture becomes a fundamental philosophical apparatus for explaining the dynamics of presence and crisis. It is understood that 'presence' is a phenomenon linked to socio-cultural identity and the relational dynamics of individuals within a specific historical horizon. Without the recognition of 'value', the subject cannot historically determine itself, cannot feel as though it exists in a 'possible world', a historical-cultural reality.

This determination, known as valorization, is an attribute that presence receives from other members of its historical-cultural world. In other words, presences are 'valorized', recognized as legitimate, by a majority consensus that also determines cultural values, social relational norms, and the historical direction of a world. However, the presence recognized as 'value' is also a victim of this dependency on the general consensus. Valorization is constantly repeated and reiterated, and failure to adhere to a set of cultural labels and habits, social norms, and conventions adopted by the world of belonging can lead to brutal exclusion from that world. This is the principle underlying the debate between 'natural' and 'unnatural', or more precisely between 'normal' and 'abnormal'.[126]

Nonetheless, there are also circumstances in which presence can feel like it is collapsing for other reasons, more pertinent to its micro-world than the macro-world. This occurs, for example, in the sense of the 'impossibility of existing in any possible world' experienced by those who see the solid norms that once sustained their world subjectively collapse. The private world fails because the presence can no longer bear its weight, or it feels the support of those mechanisms that once kept it firm giving way. At that point, the 'crisis' of the private world of presence can be treated with specific interventions of a magical-ritual nature, which often involve the intervention of other presences forming a barrier around the presence in crisis, as in the case of Apulian tarantism. The crisis of mourning, on the other hand, is a more personal form of managing this crisis, as the 'art of grieving' intervenes to protect the presence in crisis, to safeguard itself, and to face the transition to the liminality of its existence in the least risky manner possible. There is also 'weeping together', which falls under the same communal mechanisms of support, forming a barrier to this crisis.

> Human vitality is presence, that is, life that makes itself present to itself and that makes itself the center of synthetic energy according to distinct operative powers. It is the unity that conditions the distinction of cultural forms and at the same time the trigger of opposition within each of these forms. It is the technical domination of nature, the manufacture of instruments, the regime of production of economic goods; the social, legal

126 E. De Martino, *The End of the World*, pp. 83-4.

> and political organization of human groups; the struggle for power and hegemony on the part of individuals and groups. And it is this same dialectical unity that, in order to be the power of all forms, goes beyond the **useful** and the economic, extending itself in complete cultural becoming, in an ethos, art, and logos.[127]

Thus, addressing the issue of nature/culture, we must ask how these conceptual devices support presences or safeguard the world. For De Martino, there is no doubt that nature is nothing but a historical-cultural construct and not an objective truth in itself. The idea of nature is functional to the will to power because nature serves as the part of the world 'outside' the culturally ordered world, which is anomic and untamed, but also 'available' for exploitation and consumption by cultural forces.

At the same time, culture determines itself as distinct and requires 'nature' as its oppositional alterity to do so. What occurs, therefore, is neither that nature determines culture nor vice versa. The two systems are both arbiters resulting from historical determination and are 'divided' (determined) from a common original unity.

> Culture is this moral energy of detachment from nature to establish a human world. The roughest man knows that he is not called to live like a beast, just as the poet knows "you were not made to live as brutes." [...] Classificatory systems of kinship, matrilineal or patrilineal descent, and the monogamous family are also social works full of reality.[128]

The historical-cultural 'world' delineates itself within an organized space, and what it excludes is 'determined as indeterminate'. This means that the excluded is simultaneously part of the cultural order because it possesses the identity of the indeterminate, which is functional for culture to define itself as 'other' from nature and, occasionally, to exploit it. However, it is conceptually kept outside the space where sociocultural norms prevail, remaining as the anomic indeterminate, where laws, customs, and religions do not apply. Simultaneously, there is another use of nature beneficial to the forces that structure the historical-cultural domain, which is that of purity or spontaneity. Articulating an idea of 'nature' is useful and functional to the economic order because nature serves the purpose of being what 'is in itself'. The strength of the natural device lies precisely in the necessity of not having to justify the imposition of certain norms, and it is also the paradoxical aporia of the concept of nature, which is at once the unorganized and anomic space, but also the concept of the 'just'.

127 Ibid., pp. 241-2.
128 Ibid., p. 245.

> It is necessary to try to think of the economic as the *value of securitas* and thus as the inaugural value in which the ethos of the transcendence of life must be realized. The economic is the horizon of the domestic, of at *hand givenness*, of a world of "things" and "names" related according to a communitarian project of possible or actual handiness. Something useful can be made of this world precisely because it is given, and its givenness, indeed, indicates its character of practicable resistance.[129]

Ideas such as health, normality, beauty, and morality are always justified by the 'self-organizing' force of nature. The cultural order does not need to explain why certain behaviors, ways of being, aesthetic tastes, or social laws are applied, as it suffices to say that they adhere to the principle of 'naturalness'. Instead, it is those who diverge from this definition—the abnormal, the 'sick', the 'insane', the 'criminals', and the 'immoral'—who must defend themselves against the accusation of being 'unnatural'.

> Nature per se, before and independently of any human intervention, can have a practical meaning in the sense that it is of *practical use* in the operations that humankind carries out to exercise its effective domination over nature, behaving *as if* there were a nature before and independent of any human intervention. But this fundamental methodological principle of the natural sciences, this "nature" that is not controlled if not by "obeying it," this operative "as if" that postulates a "per se" on which it operates is an abstraction carried out *within* the cultural history of man and that, in its ways as in its outcomes and effective practices, is entirely conditioned by that history. In other words it is always included in a practical activity of detachment from the immediacy of living in the concreteness of a specific society. In this perspective humankind is always detaching itself from nature and can never skip this cultural-historical detaching to definitively reach "nature per se." [...]
>
> Nature always appears *in* culture, at least if culture is led back to the overall ethos that encompasses its valorizing transcendences and to the consciousness of that ethos without being fetishized in one of its dimensions, as, for example, the naturalistic valorization of the sciences (where nature is effectively assumed as if it were prior and independent of any human cultural molding).[130]

This timeless struggle has also been waged within Indian philosophical thought, where the nature/culture antinomy can be succinctly encapsulated by two conceptual spaces: the forest (*araññña*) and the village (*gāma*). The former represents an anomic, indeterminate, and wild realm, inhabited by ascetics who shun the organized space of the village, where norms and laws prevail. The Buddha

129 Ibid., p. 243.
130 Ibid., pp. 283-4.

"lives in the wilderness, frequenting remote lodgings in the wilderness within the space of the forest" (*bhagavā dīgharattaṃ āraññiko, araññavanapatthāni pantāni senāsanāni paṭisevati*, AN 10.30). Why does he choose to do so? In many discourses, the ascetic path of seclusion in the unregulated space of the forest is extolled (AN 3.93), or the necessity of retreating to remote forest locations (AN 4.138) is emphasized, where one is distant from conventional orders and where contemplative practice can reach its zenith precisely because it is outside the constrictive space of social norms.

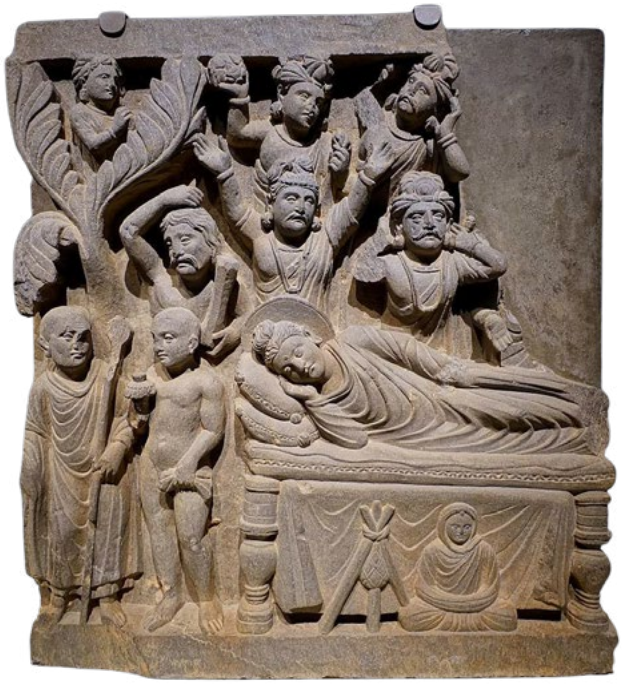

Figure 7 – Four scenes from the Life of the Buddha, Kuṣāṇa dynasty art. Exhibit in the Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., USA. Public domain.

Buddhism, however, also opposes all those anti-normative movements which, in their strenuous opposition to the subjectivizing force of cultural order, end up creating their own anti-order, which is merely a reversal of the order they oppose, but is de facto a new order. In his philosophy of "neither A nor not-A", the Buddha aims to reject precisely this principle into which the asceticism of his time frequently fell. The ascetic would flee the order of the city to meditate in the forest, but their asceticism would become so rigorous as to constitute a normativity in

themselves, a radical principle of opposition to order without criteria: society, to perpetuate itself, needs individuals to follow norms, dress and behave in certain ways, marry, and have children to ensure its continuation. Ascetics rejected all this, retreating to the forest or living on alms, possessing neither goods nor clothes, not cutting their hair, nor marrying or having children. The practices adopted, however, amounted to genuine 'self-mortification', a humiliation of the body that the Buddha saw as an extreme, something that did not resolve the problem of norms.

Hence, the Buddha identifies three types of mortification (AN 4.198): those who mortify themselves through such ascetic exercises (*ekacco puggalo attantapo hoti attaparitāpanānuyogamanuyutto*); those who mortify others, inflicting mortification upon others' lives (*ekacco puggalo parantapo hoti paraparitāpanānuyogamanuyutto*); and those who mortify both themselves and others (*ekacco puggalo attantapo ca hoti attaparitāpanānuyogamanuyutto, parantapo ca paraparitāpanānuyogamanuyutto*). It seems evident that these forms of mortification refer not only to the contemporary forms of asceticism the Buddha aimed to criticize but also to other forms of religious authority, which we might today call 'biopolitical'. Buddhist asceticism thus rejected forms of subjectivation and control over others' bodies, considering them as practices of mortification toward others.

There is a fourth way: those who neither mortify themselves nor others and propose this path of non-mortification[131]. These are, of course, the ascetics whom the Buddha praises, those who live in the forest, subsist on plant foods, and engage in contemplative exercises (*jhāna*).[132]

In the discourse on emptiness (MN 121), the Buddha repeatedly mentions the importance of the forest, explicitly highlighting the conflict constituted by the village/forest dichotomy, which we can interpret as norm/anomie or order/disorder. The forest does not represent disorder in the sense of chaos or confusion, but in the sense of being unregulated; it is a space where the normative order of the 'world', which has the greatest power within the confines of an urban reality where political, religious, and educational realities are constantly present, is inactive. This normative dimension is explicitly connected to the perceptual problem since the Buddha himself invites meditation "ignoring the perception of the village and of people, focusing on the unity that comes from the perception of the forest" (*amanasikaritvā gāmasaññaṃ, amanasikaritvā manussasaññaṃ, araññasaññaṃ paṭicca manasi karoti ekattaṃ*). Here, a distinction is drawn between the 'mundane' dimension where the perceptions of the 'village' and

131 *ekacco puggalo nevattantapo hoti nāttaparitāpanānuyogamanuyutto na parantapo na paraparitāpanānuyogamanuyutto.*

132 Cf. AN 4.198: *so sākabhakkhopi hoti sāmākabhakkhopi hoti nīvārabhakkhopi hoti daddulabhakkhopi hoti haṭabhakkhopi hoti kaṇabhakkhopi hoti ācāmabhakkhopi hoti piññākabhakkhopi hoti tiṇabhakkhopi hoti gomayabhakkhopi hoti; vanamūlaphalāhāropi yāpeti pavattaphalabhojī.*

'people' (the collectives, the historical-cultural presences organized by normative order) prevail, and the dimension of the wilderness, the 'forest', whose perception leads to conceiving some form of 'unity' (*ekatta*). Those who meditate in this way "understand" that "this emptiness is empty of the perception of the village" ('*suññamidaṃ saññāgataṃ gāmasaññāyā'ti pajānāti*), and the same applies to the emptiness of people (*suññamidaṃ saññāgataṃ manussasaññāya*).

While Buddhism generally adopts a more accepting attitude towards the body and does not advocate the extreme self-denial seen in some other traditions of the Buddha's time, it does not necessarily endorse an entirely positive view of the body. In Buddhism, the body is still seen as a limitation and cannot fully define a person's existence. Instead, it is viewed as a partial and superficial element. Attachment to the body signifies a connection to mundane conditions that fail to capture the entirety of reality, rendering the body a source of various obstacles. In AN 10.49, ten such obstacles are listed: cold, heat, hunger, thirst, feces, and urine (*sītaṃ, uṇhaṃ, jighacchā, pipāsā, uccāro, passāvo*). These first five are seen as genuine worldly impediments that arise "due to the body" with the term *sarīra* carrying a negative connotation as a burden or a dead weight to be carried along, representing "ten things that exist because of the body" (*dasayime... dhammā sarīraṭṭhā*), or as inherent in the body. This notion of burden is emphasized not only through the term *sarīra* but also through the enumeration of these impediments.

Among the remaining five impediments, four are described with the suffix -*saṃvaro* in three instances. This suffix generally implies control, but here it denotes a form of restriction or confinement, with the compound *saṃ + √var* suggesting something controlling and oppressive. When control is exercised by the yogin's own will, it is positive, as the yogin becomes the master rather than the servant (*cakkhunā saṃvaro sādhu*, "good is the control of the eye", as stated in Dhp 360).

However, AN 10.149 refers to *kāyasaṃvaro* "restriction of the body", *vacīsaṃvaro* "restriction of speech", and *ājīvasaṃvaro* "restriction of livelihood". These terms are significant, particularly with regard to speech, which reflects the confining nature of language—a major theme in Buddhism. Language is viewed as perhaps the most partial and misleading human experience, merely offering fragmented and arbitrary descriptions of reality.

The term *ājīva* refers to the mode of living and is crucial in Buddhist thought. Although we often take "life" for granted, defining it has substantial political implications. The determination of what constitutes "life" and how one should live is critical for organized power to maintain social order. This definition involves an inherent violence, manifesting in the need to educate individuals within that social order. Following the definition of "life", power claims the authority to decide which lives are valued and which are not, thus establishing rules for "living" in a society where one's "life" is considered valuable. This mechanism is well-explored in social

sciences under the concept of "biopower", where "bio-" pertains to life and the necessity of educating bodies. The norms of societal behavior are internalized and enacted by bodies. Thus, the concept of *ājīva* as a "mode of living" is significant and parallels the notion of biopower, especially considering Buddhism's critical stance on organized society. The life of the *pabbajita*, or "one who has gone forth", exemplifies someone who renounces societal norms to adopt an ascetic lifestyle, which involves both renunciations and a critique of those same societal rules.

The Indian term *jīva* and the Greek βίος share indeed a common Proto-Indo-European origin. Consequently, *ājīva* (mode of living) and *ājīvasaṃvaro* (restriction of the mode of living) are concepts related to the body, either endowed with or lacking vitality according to a system of thought embedded in cultural norms that impose certain constraints on political rights. Buddhism indeed references *sammājīva* ("correct mode of living") in contrast to *ājīvasaṃvaro.*[133]

Finally, AN 10.49 attributes to the body a tendency to yearn for future lives or reincarnations. The attachment to worldly pleasures and the desire for material and earthly goods enjoyed by the body lead it to wish for an eternal mundane existence (*ponobhaviko bhavasaṅkhāro*).

To revisit the discussion on the nature of the body and the 'soul' from a Buddhist perspective, it is essential to examine the specific terminology used. In Indian philosophical discourse, two terms are predominantly employed: the aforementioned *śarīra* and *jīva*. However, *jīva* does not necessarily denote 'soul' in the Platonic or later Christian sense but refers more generally to 'life' or vitality. This complexity is evident in texts such as Bhagavadgītā 2.16-20, which seem to critique Buddhism by presenting a more reassuring view of these concepts.

133 Reflections on life and death constitute, in every respect, one of the central themes of philosophical discourse. Just as in Buddhism, where such reflections hold significant weight within the emergent medical sphere, so too in the Greek world, the concepts of life and death have permeated ontological debates, ultimately extending into discussions of medical relevance (cf. F. DIVINO, *Elements of the Buddhist Medical System*, "*History of Science in South Asia*", 2023, 11, pp. 22-62. DOI: 10.18732/hssa97). Indeed, contemplation of the notions of life and death touches not only upon what we might today describe as biopolitical issues—concerning the nature of power and how societies organize the management of what they term 'life'—but also encompasses the regulation of life from the perspective of its preservation, thereby leading to medical or proto-medical concerns. A particularly compelling reflection on this subject can even be found within the Hippocratic Corpus, specifically in the treatise Περὶ Διαίτης 1.4, where the following is stated: "When I speak of birth and death, I do so in accordance with common parlance; however, what I truly mean is the process of coming together and separating. It is thus: birth and death are the same; merging and separating are the same; growing and declining are the same; to be born and to merge are the same; to perish, to decline, and to separate are the same. One for all, all for one is the same, and nothing in everything is the same; for in this regard, convention stands in opposition to nature" (ὅ τι δ΄ ἂν διαλέγωμαι γενέσθαι ἢ ἀπολέσθαι, τῶν πολλῶν εἵνεκεν ἑρμηνεύω· ταῦτα δὲ ξυμμίσγεσθαι καὶ διακρίνεσθαι δηλῶ· ἔχει δὲ ὧδε· γενέσθαι καὶ ἀπολέσθαι τωὐτὸ, ξυμμιγῆναι καὶ διακριθῆναι τωὐτὸ, αὐξηθῆναι καὶ μειωθῆναι τωὐτὸ, γενέσθαι, ξυμμιγῆναι τωὐτὸ, ἀπολέσθαι, μειωθῆναι, διακριθῆναι τωὐτὸ, ἕκαστον πρὸς πάντα καὶ πάντα πρὸς ἕκαστον τωὐτὸ, καὶ οὐδὲν πάντων τωὐτό· ὁ νόμος γὰρ τῇ φύσει περὶ τούτων ἐναντίος).

> Of that which is transient, there is no endurance, and of the eternal, there is no cessation. This has been discerned by the seers of that-which-is. That which pervades the entire body is known as indestructible; no one can bring about the destruction of the imperishable Soul. Only the material body is destructible. The Soul embedded within it is indestructible, immeasurable, and eternal.
>
> Therefore, fight, O descendant of Bharata! The Soul is neither born nor does it ever die. It has never existed in time, nor will it cease to exist. The Soul is innate, eternal, immortal, ageless. It does not perish with the disintegration of the body.[134]

In several ways, it becomes clear that this text, which appears to be a deliberate addition to the much older epic poem, the Mahābhārata[135], was specifically crafted to address certain ascetic movements. However, what is the actual stance of Buddhism? It is often misinterpreted as nihilism, but the intended perspective seems to be quite different. Life cannot be wholly equated with the body, nor can it be considered entirely separate from it. The first viewpoint is refuted in SN 24.13, which argues against the idea that life and the body are identical (*taṃ jīvaṃ taṃ sarīraṃ*). Similarly, SN 24.14 challenges the contrary view that life and the body are entirely distinct (*aññaṃ jīvaṃ aññaṃ sarīraṃ*).

134 Original: *nāsato vidyate bhāvo nābhāvo vidyate sataḥ, ubhayorapi dṛṣṭo 'nta stvanayos tattvadarśibhiḥ; avināśi tu tadviddhi yena sarvam idaṃ tatam, vināśam avyayasyāsya na kaścit kartum arhati; antavanta ime dehā nityasyoktāḥ śarīriṇaḥ, anāśino 'prameyasya tasmād yudhyasva bhārata [...] na jāyate mriyate vā kadāchin nāyaṃ bhūtvā bhavitā vā na bhūyaḥ, ajo nityaḥ śāśvato 'yaṃ purāṇo na hanyate hanyamāne śarīre.*

135 K. N. UPADHYAYA, *The Impact of Early Buddhism on Hindu Thought (With Special Reference to the Bhagavadgītā)*, "Philosophy East and West", 1968, 18.3, pp. 163-173. DOI: 10.2307/1398258.

8. Life and Death as institutions: a Buddhist perspective

A brief philosophical note accompanies our reflections on the anthropological analysis of the concept of death in ancient Buddhism. When discussing life and death, we are primarily addressing conceptions. Specifically, life and death are in a relationship of mutual exclusion, like every concept foundational to thought. In this text, we have observed that Buddhism emphasizes, from the inception of its philosophical thought, the illusory nature of binary conceptions, highlighting the dualistic foundation of the relationship between X and ~X, which is the operating principle of every conception. Everything in the world is based on the antinomy between X and ~X, which forms the foundation of the world of "things and names" upon which the power of thought organizes manipulable reality[136]. If this deception is dispelled, as contemplative practice aspires to do, what remains is not nothingness, but rather the pre-distinguished totality of the infinite possible manifestations of being—the invisible emptiness that encompasses every possible determination, yet determinations, no matter how numerous and detailed, can never fully comprehend.

> Desiring something to be a sign (and primarily desiring something to be the word of a thing), language appropriates both the being that is transformed into a sign and the being that is transformed into the meaning of the sign. It appropriates them in the sense that it isolates each sign from other signs, each thing from others, and signs from things, and all from the context in which they manifest; and thus isolated, it makes them available for specific projects of arrangement and interpretation of the world. The word is a net cast upon the thing.[137]

Within this binary relationship, we also encounter the fundamental antinomy that precedes even basic ones (pure/impure, healthy/ill, good/bad), namely the antinomy between life and death. As this antinomy serves as the foundation for the psychoanthropological management of reality, great care must be taken in how we relate to it, refraining from the preconceptions that typically accompany discussions of these concepts. Death, like life, is "instituted" as a concept, and at the moment of its institution, it assumes a value—or rather, a basis of value[138]. In the Demartinian theory, the valorization carried out by the economic order governing human societies is what dispenses the possibility of "being present" in

136 E. De Martino, *The End of the World: Cultural Apocalypse and Transcendence*, The University of Chicago Press (Chicago and London 2023): p. 243. DOI: 10.7208/chicago/9780226820569.001.0001.

137 E. Severino, *La Gloria. ἅσσα οὐκ ἔλπονται: Risoluzione di "Destino della Necessità"*, Adelphi (Milan 2001): p. 470.

138 For the problem of life as an institution see R. Esposito, *Vitam Instituere. Genealogia dell'istituzione*, Einaudi (Turin 2023).

history[139]. Simultaneously, it condemns certain individuals, deemed of no value, to depart from history, to exile from the socio-cultural domain. This exile, weighing heavily on the excluded presence, is experienced as an end of the world, a collapse of presence in crisis[140]. The crisis of presence thus becomes a problem to the extent that the valorization system is decisive for the experiences of individuals who undergo the crisis of their presence excluded from the economic order or benefit from the valorization attributed to them. However, in both cases, this system is nothing more than a deception, a mythical-ritual device based on the belief that Being can be given and taken away. Thus, presence, which aligns its being-in-the-world with its own possibility of existence, will experience the distressing nihilistic crisis as a total annulment of its essence—a death without the possibility of redemption, at least as long as it believes in the valorization system of essences[141].

Turning to Buddhism, whose thought is, despite everything, much less pessimistic than Demartinian nihilism, the possibility of redemption lies not in the recovery of one's presence as a state of value or in the absence of crisis but rather in transcending presence through the abandonment of the value system. In other words, Buddhism believes in a possibility of existence without presence, unlinking the belief that being-in-history or being-in-the-socio-cultural-world coincides with existence tout court. The unveiling of this deception is discernible in multiple points of Buddhist reflection, which is nothing more than the evolution of a reflection on death already present in the proto-Indo-European world.

This same world forms the basis of Greek cultural forces, and in it, one can recognize the seeds that will lead these two peoples, Greeks and Indians, to the institutionalization of life and hence death as facts, incontrovertible on the epistemological level. This institutionalization serves two fundamental aspects: the first is governability. By instituting life, it is possible to place it in the realm of cultural valorization that regulates it in the political dimension. Life is thus something that is "valorized" (to use De Martino's terminology) in different ways depending on the circumstances. Consider the Indian caste system, where "living" subjects are classified in a hierarchical system where the value of their lives differs based on caste membership. Notably, this hierarchy regulating lives of lesser or greater value is also related to other fundamental antinomies, such as purity and impurity[142]. The caste system is vehemently opposed by the Buddha, who demonstrates, in numerous passages, the rejection of the antinomic categorical

139 E. De Martino, *Storia e Metastoria. I fondamenti di una teoria del Sacro*, Argo (Lecce 1995): pp. 99-105.

140 S. F. Berardini, *Presenza e negazione. Ernesto De Martino tra filosofia, storia e religione*, Edizioni ETS (Pisa 2015).

141 F. Divino, *Mindful Apocalypse: Contemplative Anthropology Investigating Experiences of World-Loss in Deep Meditation* "Religions", 2023, 14.7, No. 941. DOI: 10.3390/rel14070941.

142 On the relation between purity and the social organization of caste system in Indian thought see Idem, *Tra Purezza e Ascesi. Conclusioni sul problema della visione medica nel Buddhismo*, "AM Rivista della Società Italiana di Antropologia Medica", 2023, 24.55, pp. 307-335.

system and, consequently, the management of "life" as an institution subject to the cultural and political order of the time[143]. In Greece, where according to Severino, death is first conceived as "absolute nothingness" (τὸ μηδαμῶς ὀν), things are not much different[144]. The institution of life is also tightly linked here to the needs of political control through social classes in the typical Indo-European style. Slaves are a classic example of lives of lesser value, often equated with those of animals. In this sense, although Agamben's βίος/ζωή dichotomy is not etymologically accurate[145], it helps us understand the functioning principle of this thought: political life endowed with rights (βίος) is of superior value to animal and "killable" life (ζωή)[146]. In India as well, 'killability' is a fundamental category for understanding the organization of human and animal life, especially concerning the management of sacrifice and the possibility of killing certain pure or impure animals[147].

In this entire system, where does the management of death fit? If life is indeed an "institution" conceived for valorization purposes, similarly, death, being its necessary and inevitable antinomy, will find its own place in this complex socio-cultural organization of perceived reality.

Both βίος and ζωή derive from the same Indo-European root *$g^{w}eyh_{3}$-, meaning "to live". The Latin term *vīvō* is also part of the outcomes of this single root, articulated in various ways in Indo-European languages. However, there is another term of central importance derived from the adjectival form, reaching, through the proto-Indo-Iranian form **jiH̯wás*, two identical terms in Sanskrit and Old Persian: *jīva*, meaning "life". In subsequent philosophical elaborations, it also came to signify "soul" and "vital principle". It would not be incorrect to assume that even in the Indian world the institution of life (*jīvita*) has progressively established itself as a form of socio-cultural power as it was for the Western βίος and the associated biopower. A related term in Middle Persian is *žīwandāg*, meaning "to live".

Another significant verb, this time in Sanskrit, stems from the verbal form through the proto-Indo-Iranian **jíH̯wati*, giving rise to the Sanskrit verb *jīvati*, meaning "to live". In human cognition, life represents the supreme principle of

143 On the rejection of caste system in Early Buddhist thought see IDEM, *An Anthropological Outline of the Sutta Nipāta: The Contemplative Experience in Early Buddhist Poetry*, "Religions", 2023, 14.2, No. 172. DOI: 10.3390/rel14020172.

144 E. SEVERINO, *Destino della Necessità*, p. 33. In this case wester nihilism is established trying to assert that "nothingness" "isn't something, but nothing indeed" (μὴ όν γε ουχ ἕν τι αλλὰ μηδέν). The problem introduced by the reification of the idea of nothingness is anthropological: "The fact that "nothing" *signifies*, that is to say, it *denotes* the *absence of any meaning*, constitutes precisely the essential *contradiction* of nothingness – namely, the fundamental aporia of nothingness" cf. IDEM, *Intorno al Senso del Nulla*, Adelphi (Milan 2013): p. 107.

145 J. G. FINLAYSON, *"Bare Life" and Politics in Agamben's Reading of Aristotle*, "The Review of Politics", 2010, 72: 97-126. DOI: 10.1017/S0034670509990982.

146 G. AGAMBEN, *Homo Sacer. Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Stanford University Press (Stanford 1998).

147 F. DIVINO, *Tra Purezza e Ascesi…*

being, opposing non-being or nothingness just as being opposes non-being. The Indo-European root for death is **mer*, with its zero grade **mr̥-* found in the compound adjective **mr̥tós*, meaning "dead" or "mortal". Apart from the obvious Latin outcome, the Greek term βροτός, meaning "mortal", is also derived from this root, used to refer to human beings (see chapter 2).

As previously said, the Greek concept accepts the idea that humans possess the characteristic of mortality. Similarly, in ancient Indian thought, the idea of death (*mr̥tyúḥ*) and mortality (*mr̥tá*) prevailed in describing human conditions, often referred to as *márta*, meaning "mortal". In ancient Persian culture, humans were called *martiya*, signifying "the mortal", destined to die. This conception is not solely Greek but predates Greek thought, inherited from the ancient Indo-European root shared by Indo-Iranians. Therefore, Severino's view of Parmenides may need reconsideration. If death is merely the supreme non-being of Being, whose supreme being is Life, and considering that this ideology of death is pre-Greek, preceding Aristotle, we cannot attribute to him or his successors the philosophical crime of introducing the powerful idea of "nothingness" that led to nihilism[148]. It was inherent in the Indo-European mentality, and it just happened that the Parmenidean attempts to demonstrate its inconsistency have been thwarted by more powerful philosophies that instead heavily relied on technics.

Death, as the supreme Nothing preceding the conceptualization of the absolute Greek negative (μή), became prominent even before Greek philosophical analysis. Death appears as a potent idea of Nothing, the true original nothingness as the very appearance of the end, the cessation of entities. Moreover, the archetype of "disappearance" is present in the idea of death, misunderstood as destruction or vanishing into nothing. Even today, we say "he has disappeared" or "he has passed away" to delicately indicate someone's death, not realizing that the unconscious directing this metaphor is suggesting something other than a mere metaphor—the reality of death not as annihilation but as a "disappearing" from sight, a stable way in which being "moves outside the appearance of being"[149]. However, this disappearing is confused with destruction or going into nothing.

Yet, there is a clue suggesting that this misunderstanding is somewhat deceptive, and further linguistic and philological studies should systematically delve into the issue of death and nothingness, capturing this hint. Hittite is somewhat peculiar among Indo-European languages, preserving extremely archaic features not found in other language families. Some linguists suggest that Hittite separated from the Indo-European continuum much earlier than other language families. If certain morphological peculiarities allow this hypothesis, it may be inferred that certain lexical meanings in the Hittite form preserve the most archaic variant of the meaning of certain Indo-European roots.

148 E. SEVERINO, *Essenza del Nichilismo*, Adelphi (Milan 1982).
149 Ibid., p. 197.

Examining the Hittite term originating from the root **mer-*, which in all other Indo-European languages indicates "death" in a sense of "annihilation" of being, we find that in Hittite, the term is *merzi*, interpreted more precisely as "to disappear" or "to vanish". This is significantly different from the more direct and potent concept of "death"[150].

While other Indo-European languages have completely replaced the concept of "annihilation" with that of "disappearing" in words derived from the root **mer-*, the situation is different in Hittite. Consulting the *Etymological Dictionary of the Hittite Inherited Lexicon* and focusing on the term *merzi/mar*[151], the definition provided is entirely different: "'to disappear, to vanish'" and in adjectival derivatives like *marnuu̯-ala*, the definition is "'invisible'", which is quite distinct from "destroyed" or "annihilated". Another derived term, *mar-nu-u̯ a-la-an*, *marnuzi*, *mernuzi*, is defined as "to cause to disappear, to dissolve". The hypothesis that the original Indo-European term did not signify death in a nihilistic sense but rather "disappearance", a "no longer being visible" of the entity, seems to be confirmed.

As further confirmation, the same author of the dictionary provides this explanation[152], stating that the term *merzi/mar* "is generally connected with PIE **mer-* which is usually glossed 'to die'. In my view, however, the Hittite meaning 'to disappear' must have been the original meaning, whereas the meaning 'to die' as found in other IE languages only developed after the splitting off of Anatolian. It is likely that **mer-* 'to disappear' was at first a euphemistic term for dying". If this hypothesis is correct, a radical shift has occurred in Indo-European thought, and its most archaic form, fortunately attested by the Anatolian family that seems to have separated much earlier than other linguistic groups, involves the great misunderstanding that Severino recognizes concerning the conception of Being. That is, the idea that disappearing is confused with annihilation, leading to the notion of death as the supreme annihilation of Being, is a historical fact.

With the negation prefix **n̥-*, Indo-European languages that conceptualize death as annihilation develop the concept of **n̥mr̥tós*, meaning "immortal" or "that which cannot die". The derived terms of interest include the Greek ἄμβροτος, meaning "immortal", and ἀμβροσία, the nectar of the gods, as well as the Sanskrit *amṛ́ta*, considered a drink that grants immortality. If death is indeed the illusory concept of annulment we mentioned, then we would expect Buddhism to vehemently oppose the idea of death as the primary illusion. Indeed, according to some scholars, "the Buddha at first sought, and realized, the 'deathless'

150 The Indo-European etymological dictionary, *Indogermanisches etymologisches Wörterbuch* (1959) by Julius Pokorny, defines **mer-* on page 735 as "sterben" ("to die") or "aufgerieben werden" ("to be cancelled"). An example from Hittite, *me-ir-ta*, is translated as "starb" ("dead"), but it cannot be certain that this meaning is not a reinterpretation derived from a metaphor beginning to establish itself in Indo-European mentality.

151 Dictionary edited by ALWIN KLOEKHORST, 2008, Brill publisher, entry p. 577

152 Ibid., p. 578.

(*amata*/*amṛa*), which is concerned with the here and now"[153]. By virtue of this we can therefore deduce that Buddhist immortality is not intended as an extension of life, but as a transcendence of life as an institution, and once life is transcended, death is also transcended into 'deathless'.

Figure 8 – The Buddha Vanquishes the army of Māra, King of Death, 10th century painting on silk, Dūnhuáng. Public domain.

153 J. Bronkhorst, *Did the Buddha Believe in Karma and Rebirth?*, "Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies", 21.1, 1998, pp. 1-19: p. 3.

It is said that when the Buddha was about to achieve enlightenment under the Bodhi tree, the demon Māra intervened to distract him with various temptations embodied in his three daughters: discontent, craving, and lust. The name of this demon, Māra, derives from the same root as the term "death". Having failed in attempts to distract the Buddha from his meditation and, once enlightenment (*bodhi*) was attained, it can be said that, in a certain sense, the Buddha "defeated" death, that is, defeated Māra.

Defeated death, overcome illusion, and abandoned attachment to ephemeral things, what then is reality? While it is devoid of the substantialities attributed to it, can we say that "nothing" exists, or that things, stripped of their illusory natures, go into nothingness? Buddhism has never asserted that they go into nothingness, and therefore, even regarding the Being of the individual, which Buddhists somewhat reluctantly avoid addressing directly, it cannot be said to extinguish since Being is, by definition, itself, and therefore cannot be non-being.

So, what is this "core", this "embryo" (*garbha*) that remains at the death of the body? While it cannot be definitively stated whether the Nikāya Buddhism accepted or denied the Soul (as it simply does not discuss it), the situation is different in early Buddhism, the so-called pre-sectarian ancient Buddhism, in which, according to some scholars, the Soul was accepted[154]. The root of the term *māyā*, which the Buddha uses to indicate cognitive illusion, comes from the verb *mā*, meaning "to measure", indicating that it is measurement that creates deception. It is the imposition of a measure or value that creates the surreptitious cognitive division that forms the world of the relative. In the sense outlined so far, the radical departure from reality (*abhiniṣkramaṇa*) pursued by Buddhist ascetic practice places itself in a context where society is nothing but the cradle of nominal and identitarian descriptors that give us the illusion of a world organized by antinomies, oppositions, and categories. These descriptors, however, serve no other purpose than to control social subjects, with the fear of death, submission to hierarchies based on the economic management of their lives, "valorized" on a hierarchical scale with inevitable repercussions on their fate (impure individuals or those with devalued lives will be condemned to slavery or a life more miserable than the well-off and powerful). By fleeing the city, the Buddha positions himself to detach from this order of reality, which inevitably includes death, and chooses to become an "immortal", not in the sense of living forever, as he rejects both the concept of life and death as the annulment of being.

> For some, infirmity, aging, and mortality unfold as inherent aspects of existence. While these facets align with the intrinsic order of their nature, the ordinary people find them repugnant. Should disdain be directed towards

154 IDEM, *The two Traditions of Meditation in Ancient India*, Motilal Banarsidass (Delhi 1993): p. 99.

> creatures embodying such inherent characteristics, it would not be fitting for me, as my existence mirrors theirs. Dwelling in such a manner, I have apprehended the veracity encapsulated in emancipation from worldly attachments. I have attained mastery over all conceits: well-being, youth, and even life [*jīvita*] itself. A fervor ignited within me as I beheld the prospect of liberation. Henceforth, the pursuit of sensual pleasures eludes me, for I am irrevocably committed to the path of spiritual life, with no possibility of retracing my steps.[155]

In the well-known mythological narrative about the Buddha's liberation from the illusions of the dichotomy between life and death, it is recounted that the trauma which triggered his intention to 'transcend' this very dichotomy occurred precisely when his luxurious life as a prince, in which his father had confined him to shield him from the world's evils, shattered due to several key events.

At the age of 29, unaware of the reality outside the royal palace, he ventured out and witnessed the harshness of life in a way that left him stunned. Encountering an elderly person, a sick person, and a dead person (some sources mention a funeral), he suddenly realized that suffering unites all of humanity and that the wealth, culture, and heroism taught to him at court were ephemeral values. He understood that his existence was a golden prison and internally began to reject its comforts and riches.

Shortly after meeting a calm and serene mendicant monk, he decided to renounce family, wealth, glory, and power to seek liberation. One night, while the royal palace was enveloped in silence and everyone was asleep, aided by his loyal charioteer Channa, he mounted his horse Kanthaka and abandoned his family and kingdom to pursue an ascetic life. According to another tradition, he communicated his decision to his parents, and despite their pleas and lamentations, he shaved his head and face, discarded his rich garments, and left home. He took a vow of poverty and embarked on a tormented path of critical introspection.

The episode from the life of the Buddha concerning his turn towards ascetic practice illustrates how, from the outset, Buddhism has been driven by an interest in the great dilemma of death. The metaphor of the Buddha abandoning the trappings of palace life to embark on an ascetic journey also represents a significant portrayal of the ascetic ideal, critiquing the norm by forsaking the very place where it is established and reiterated. In the case of the Buddha, this place is represented by the palace, the epicenter of authority and kingship, but more broadly, the place of the norm is society or the world (*loka*) as understood by

155 Sukhumālasutta, AN 3.39. Original: *byādhidhammā jarādhammā, atho maraṇadhammino; yathādhammā tathāsantā, jigucchanti puthujjanā. ahañce taṃ jiguccheyyaṃ, evaṃdhammesu pāṇisu; na metaṃ patirūpassa, mama evaṃ vihārino. sohaṃ evaṃ viharanto, ñatvā dhammaṃ nirūpadhiṃ; ārogye yobbanasmiñca, jīvitasmiñca ye madā. sabbe made abhibhosmi, nekkhamme daṭṭhu khemataṃ; tassa me ahu ussāho, nibbānaṃ abhipassato. nāhaṃ bhabbo etarahi, kāmāni paṭisevituṃ; anivatti bhavissāmi, brahmacariyaparāyaṇo ...*

Buddhists. This narrative invites reflection on the antinomy of life and death as the original dichotomy from which all other dualistic orders develop. It is in SN 12.15 where we find a pivotal discourse on the dual nature (*dvayanissito*) of the world.

Indeed, starting from the original antinomy of life and death, all other normative orders based on the same binary relationship between two opposing elements come into operation. We can draw examples from anthropological tradition, also present in the culture of the Buddha's India, which later structured the deeply criticized caste system, a system that generated suffering and inequality through imposed differentiation. One of the normative orders through which society was structured into castes was precisely the antinomy of purity and impurity[156], which naturally descends from the original dichotomy of life and death, as the impure are those closest to death. Similarly, from the dichotomy of purity and impurity arises the dichotomy of health and disease, which significantly interests medical anthropology, and the dichotomy of norm and anomie. These two dichotomies are naturally closely related, as the sick often coincide with the anomalous, as seen in the figure of the madman. All these antinomies serve to organize society, but they are indeed forms of power over life that cannot be exercised on subjects without first establishing them as forms of life. To establish forms of life, one must also invent death as its opposition. Hence, it is explained why the heart of Buddhist contemplative practice focuses on the pursuit of a state that can be defined as the absence of death rather than immortality in the sense of eternally long life.

For instance, there has been debate about the original meaning of the idea of consciousness in Buddhism, and today we can say that consciousness is not something that depends on form but is simultaneously something that determines form. Also, probably two different forms of contemplation arose from different views on consciousness. For instance, in one of these discussions (AN 6.46) it is also preached the 'cessation of sensation and perception' (*saññāvedayita-nirodha*), which happens to coincide with the 'deathless element' (*amatā dhātu*).

Thus, there is no consciousness that organizes the world based on pre-established forms; it achieves forms doubly, both in the sense that it organizes them and in the sense that it can be understood as a form of pre-noetic and transitive sentience that[157], when it perceives a form, is capable of associating it with a nominal signifier or even conforming according to how socio-cultural education expects that form to be organized in the world. However, consciousness is also capable of shaping the form, creating a mutual relationship between the two in which it is impossible to understand which comes first.

156 F. Divino, *Tra Purezza e Ascesi…*

157 A. Wynne, *Sariputta or Kaccāna? A preliminary study of two early Buddhist philosophies of mind and meditation*, "Journal of the Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies", 14, 2018, pp. 77-107.

9. Biopower, thanatopower, transculturation: Modern 'Buddhist' psychology for a *mindful* society

In this oscillation between the institute of life and the institute of death, amidst the fundamental binary accompanying the economic management of our lives (to echo De Martino), it is crucial to also consider the value of life instituted in this system as a form of control over subjectivities operated by forces that attribute certain values to the concept of life. This peculiar form of valorization has been identified in models that Foucault defined as biopolitics.

Contrary to what we might imagine today, biopolitics or even biopower, which can be used synonymously with the former, referring to the actual capacity to exert control over institutionalized forms of life within a socio-cultural system, is not something exclusive to modern Western societies nor is it a form of power manifested solely in other societies due to being exported from the West. Indeed, we can recognize that both in ancient Greece and ancient India, the exercise of biopower was fully operational. It is precisely in resistance to these forms of power and control that ascetic practice is founded. Buddhist ascetic practice opposes those of life-control techniques that paradoxically the Buddha would define as 'mortifying'. These techniques were integral part of the normative system of prevailing biopolitics in ancient India. However, other Indian ascetic practices became equally systems of biopolitics by adopting a form of inversion of all values of βίος, thus of life, with the paradoxical consequence of producing mortiferous practices solely to oppose a system of control over lives through the institutionalization of life itself.

Recognizing the contradiction of these rigid ascetic practices and their production of the opposite of what they set out to do, namely to escape from the valorization system that, just as it instituted life, necessarily based itself on the fear of the opposed value to it, the Buddha proposes his radically non-dualistic asceticism, which we now know what it was based on. However, regarding biopolitics and biopower, it is crucial to further articulate the issue as it fundamentally speaks to the Buddhist psychology concerning the idea of death, even through a diachronic aspect. We will conclude, in fact, with an examination of the idea of the Institute of Life at the time of the Buddha, namely of biopolitics, with which the Buddha had to deal when formulating his system of liberation from antinomies through contemplative practice, and how paradoxically in modern Western society, which has adopted the device of contemplative practice because it was fascinated by the benefits it brought, it has ended up producing yet another paradox, namely bending contemplative practice to what is the fundamental tendency of the modern Western world, that is what Emanuele Severino lucidly recognized as the force of *technics* (τέχνη), which is nothing but a mortiferous force in itself.

The adaptation of meditation to the 'therapeutic technique' desired by neoliberal needs that use technics as a tool for expanding their power has produced a contemplative practice that conforms to those neoliberal needs and thus reflects the desires to reiterate the biopolitical institute contrary to how contemplative practice originally functioned[158]. This paradox of contemporaneity is what I will analyze in this final section, continuing to take as a starting point the idea of death and the biopolitical force that institutes values of life to manage social subjects, an existing tendency both in contemporary society and in archaic India, and evidenced in this sense not only by Buddhism but also by other Indian schools of thought that address the same issue albeit in different forms, revealing different interests in protecting or criticizing it.

In reporting some statements made by the Dalai Lama in his 2005 text, Lo Turco derives the following synthesis: for the spiritual guide of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, as well as a reference point for many Western Buddhists, "science is hierarchically superior to Buddhism"[159]. This statement might appear as an alignment between two thought traditions fostering dialogue, but it should actually be understood as the epistemological subjugation of one over the other. For a Western audience, the supremacy of techno-scientific episteme seems self-evident, having solidified as a dominant form of thought since the Enlightenment and further reinforced by positivism, thus capable of shaping subjectivities in our world. However, it is merely one among various epistemic forms that humanity can articulate.

Even without invoking Foucault, cultural anthropology, focusing on ethno-sciences and culturally determined forms of knowledge, has long acknowledged that a universally valid system is merely a claim that within a given culture, a certain form of veridiction assumes hegemonic status. We will scrutinize these various assertions point by point. Yet, prior comprehension is crucial: believing

158 The neoliberal transformation of Mindfulness has not merely resulted in the commodification of contemplative practice, which, once stripped of its spiritual aspects, historical-cultural context, and philosophical tradition, has been readapted to suit the needs of a neoliberal market product. Rather, it has also entailed the loss of wisdom concerning the issue of death and transition that Buddhism provided. With the commodification of meditation in the "mindfulness" product, death becomes a marketing tool: the fear of the unknown is utilized as a lever to attract more buyers of the product. This is also symptomatic of the ongoing medicalization or, in the case of mindfulness, psychologization of public life— the progressive transformation of every discomfort into a treatable illness by a pharmaceutical-fashioned product, rather than recognizing it as an issue that requires a radical change in the presumably unhealthy environment in which it proliferates. This, of course, implies that mindfulness is not a panacea. Hence, "there is a high prevalence (8.3%) of adverse events in Meditation practices and Meditation-based therapies", cf. P. Chachignon, E. Le Barbenchon, L. Danu, *Mindfulness research and applications in the context of neoliberalism: A narrative and critical review*, "Social and Personality Psychology Compass", 2024, 18.2, pp. 1–17. DOI: 10.1111/spc3.12936, cit. p. 4.

159 B. Lo Turco, *Salvare il Buddhismo dalla scienza. Osservazioni su una confusione di giochi linguistici*, in F. Squarcini & M. Sernesi, (eds.) "Il Buddhismo Contemporaneo: Rappresentazioni, Istituzioni, Modernità", Società Editrice Fiorentina (Florence 2006), pp. 43-68: 43.

that knowledge forms like Buddhism and Western science are entirely alien to each other, or thinking of them as homogeneous, to use Lo Turco's definition, represents two extremes of a common misunderstanding — the idea that such judgments are not dictated by one of the two epistemic forms imposing hegemony upon the other. Specifically, in the relationship between Buddhism and Western science, these struggles for identity affirmation have persisted for a considerable duration. In 1893, a young Suzuki Daisetsu Teitarō participated as a delegate at the Parliament of the World's Religions during the Columbian Exposition[160]. At that time, Japan endeavored to legitimize itself in Western eyes as a credible interlocutor, with Zen being the tool to demonstrate Japan's possession of a rationalistic form capable of competing with Western technical rationalism. He wasn't alone during these attempts. Other distinguished figures such as Anagārika Dharmapāla, stated in that occasion: "the Buddha preached, among others, the theory of evolution" making "the alleged affinity between evolution and *karman* one of the pillars of 'scientific Buddhism'"[161].

Despite the unfavorable outcome, Suzuki attempted again at the World Congress of Faiths in 1936[162]. Overall, the experiment failed miserably, and we know that Suzuki himself, who had advocated for the notion of a rational Zen and a Japanese enlightenment distinct from the West, now espoused the idea of Zen as total irrationality to defend its uniqueness and make it a specific identity trait of the Japanese people.

Following Japan's defeat in World War II and the establishment of Western cultural hegemony, there emerged a renewed need for global credibility. The alternatives were either to abandon cultural specificities entirely in favor of the dominant hegemonic culture or to risk cultural extinction. The absorption of a culture by a hegemonic power invariably leads to the dissolution of the absorbed culture. This metaphorical digestion results in a cultural product that aligns with the needs of the dominant power but not with those of the subjugated.

Among the various cultural products arising from this dynamic, mindfulness has achieved considerable success, becoming a cornerstone in certain areas of biomedical science and beyond. I propose that the success of mindfulness within the framework of Western hegemonic culture is so profound that it serves as a theoretical tool to describe the evolution of traditional biopower and the subjectivation of bodies toward a Mindful Social System (MSS). In this system, the transculturation of mindfulness practice into a biomedical device reflects a fundamental trend of our time, shaping social bodies inclined toward drowsiness

160 J. R. McRae, *Oriental Verities on the American Frontier: The 1893 World's Parliament of Religions and the Thought of Masao Abe*, "Buddhist-Christian Studies", 1991, 11, pp. 7-36. DOI: 10.2307/1390252.

161 B. Lo Turco, *Salvare il Buddhismo dalla scienza…*, cit. p. 45.

162 T. Moriya, *D.T. Suzuki at the World Congress of Faiths in 1936: An Analysis of His Presentation at the Interfaith Conference*, "Journal of Religion in Japan", 2021, 10.2-3, pp. 135–160. DOI: 10.1163/22118349-01002001.

and automatism. This model surpasses even biopolitics by envisioning the self-discipline of social subjects and their ability to anticipate the needs of power, now transformed into dominion.

Therefore, I will present a Mindful Social Theory (MST) as a model for understanding the evolution of biopolitics in contemporary society. To achieve this, I will analyze how the stages of inculturation and transculturation of Buddhist body techniques, which Western biomedicine has transformed into techniques of the self, have facilitated the transition from meditation to mindfulness while fundamentally reversing the original intentions of the practice. The MST does not assert that mindfulness itself is the apparatus through which modern society seeks to affirm a desired socio-cultural model. Rather, it posits that the principles governing mindfulness and its transformation align with those of contemporary society, leading to a mindful model and mindful (automated) subjectivity within the context of evolving biopower tools.

We aim to theoretically reflect upon an anthropological issue pertaining to the theme of biopower, without intending to level any accusation against mindfulness as a therapeutic practice, whose documented benefits are acknowledged. The critique directed towards mindfulness as a system of thought concerns a broader biopolitical question, which is intended to be contemplated here on an anthropological level.

From now on, I will primarily engage with the concepts of biopower and biopolitics as developed by Foucault and adapted in the works of Agamben. I will also draw upon certain anthropological concepts delineated by Ernesto De Martino in his works, alongside terminologies that I have personally employed for this discourse. The ideas of De Martino that I aim to present concern the concepts of valorization and economic order. As we have seen in chapter 2, the foundational pillar of his theory is the presence (an ethnological adaptation of Heidegger's *Dasein*), which primarily rests on its separation from nature and the artificial construction of a culture based on this dichotomy. De Martino regards this operation as "a technique of presence towards oneself in order not to become nature and to allow for a culture to emerge"[163]. This technique (τέχνη) can also be understood as a "politics" (De Martino precisely employs this term), which, prior to political technique, was mere life akin to that of animals[164]. With this theory, De Martino significantly anticipates Agamben's work on "bare life" (ζωή) and political life (βίος). The potential for a presence to determine itself in history and within a culture, separate from nature, is granted by the capacity for valorization. For De Martino, value is that which allows the being to be the focal point of objectification within a cultural realm through isolation[165]. This force, understood as ἦθος

163 E. De Martino, *Storia e Metastoria…*, cit. p. 60.
164 Ibid., p. 106.
165 Ibid., p. 105.

("custom", "habit"), is managed and organized by the economic order: De Martino interprets οἰκονομία in terms of management and distribution (νέμω) of values.

Summarizing: mere life contracts into economic life through valorization, the process that isolates individual presences from nature and situates them within a level of ἦθος wherein a value is attributed, managed, and organized. Implicitly understood is that human subjectivity, in the form of presence, can be endowed of existential value only through cultural systems. Therefore, if society no longer valorizes it, the society itself is delegitimized of its raison d'être. The management of collectivity, of a population, i.e., an ἔθνος, is closely linked to the ἦθος and the force of οἰκονομία. Just as presence is "valorized", endowed with a value for the cultural system, the Western ἔθνος moves "towards the nature valorized in technique and science, towards humanity valorized in social and economic order"[166].

The process of inculturation and transculturation of Buddhist meditation into the form of mindfulness can effectively be perceived as a mechanism of valorization. The prevailing value in this context is evidently that of Western technoscience conveyed through the biomedical apparatus, which has transformed mindfulness into a form of psychotherapy adapted to the needs of the dominant epistemic form. The employed value thus acts as an initial filter, allowing, in the process of inculturation, only those elements considered 'valuable' from the originating culture to pass through to the hegemonic culture of reception. Following this phase of selective absorption, the actual process of transculturation occurs: the acceptable values are reorganized to align with the requirements of the system embracing them, in this case, biomedicine. These transformative mechanisms mirror, in all aspects, processes of cultural hegemonic dominance that enable us to identify the three significant stages in the history of Western power and institutions: the first being that of disciplinary power, rooted in the 'norm' as the value of values within the economic order.

Valorization, within all three stages of power development, is decreed based on a standard, which is the norm. However, the normative system employed within the disciplinary order tended to be exclusionary: those who do not conform to the norm are relegated to the anomalous dimension, wherein they hold no sway over the social order nor can lay claim to political rights, as seen in the case of the insane, criminals, or those lacking the disciplinary education provided by the system. In the past, the anomic subjects were considered incapable to take part to the social dynamics, thus they were almost like beasts.

> Over natural fools, children, or madmen there is no law, no more than over brute beasts; nor are they capable of the title of just or unjust, because they had never power to make any covenant or to understand the consequences thereof, and consequently never took upon them to authorize

166 Ibid., p. 99.

> the actions of any sovereign, as they must do that make to themselves a Commonwealth.[167]

This system inherently necessitated centers of power where the anomalous were relegated and others from which the normative order was promulgated: examples include asylums, penal systems, schools, and ultimately law enforcement agencies utilized for maintaining the norm[168].

Over time, society came to realize that the complete exclusion of the anomalous was an overly burdensome system to uphold, thus progressing towards the form of biopolitics. The biopolitical normative order allows greater social adaptability for the anomalous and the possibility of their re-inclusion in the ἔθνος order through the attribution of specific identities. These processes of subjectivation prove more effective in reclaiming a significant portion of the population that would otherwise be categorically excluded from production systems. However, the price to pay for this reintegration is inherently the act of becoming subjected. The removal of homosexuality from the realm of psychopathologies, for instance, did not occur due to a genuine abandonment of xenophobia by the disciplinary system but rather because of its full evolution into biopolitics. Homosexual individuals were able to enjoy social reintegration, thereby becoming useful once more to the productive system[169], on the condition of being subjected under a predetermined category or 'value', precisely their sexual identity, no longer anomalous but now integrated within the domain of the ἔθνος. Consequently, this reintegration was possible only if the social category to be reintegrated granted society control over its own form-of-life.

It is crucial not to mistake what is presented as goodwill for genuine inclusivity while overlooking its biopolitical intentions. Just as biopolitics was implicated (and hence predictable) within the disciplinary state, my theory posits that MSS is a form of biopower tailored to the normative requirements of the current hegemonic techno-science, constituting the third act in the evolution of power within the hegemonic cultural system.

> The classical age discovered the body as object and target of power. It is easy enough to find signs of the attention then paid to the body – to the body that is manipulated, shaped, trained which obeys, responds, becomes skillful and increases its forces. The great book of Man-the-Machine was written simultaneously on two registers: the anatomico-metaphysical register, of

167 T. HOBBES, *Leviathan or The Matter, Forme and Power of a Commonwealth Ecclesiasticall and Civil*, Andrew Crooke (London 1651), 1651, Digital version used for quotations: https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Leviathan. Cit. XXVI.

168 M. FOUCAULT, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Penguin (New York 2020); IDEM, *Power: Essential Works 1954-84*, Penguin (New York 2020).

169 IDEM, *Wrong-Doing, Truth-Telling: the Function of Avowal in Justice*, The University of Chicago Press (Chicago & London 2014): pp. 220-1, 257-62.

> which Descartes wrote the first pages and which the physicians and philosophers continued, and the technico-political register, which was constituted by a whole set of regulations and by empirical and calculating methods relating to the army, the school and the hospital, for controlling or correcting the operations of the body. [...] A body is docile that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved. The celebrated automata, on the other hand, were not only a way of illustrating an organism, they were also political puppets, small-scale models of power: Frederick II, the meticulous king of small machines, well-trained regiments and long exercises, was obsessed with them.[170]

Ernesto De Martino adeptly depicts this latest stage of society, preempting the times by employing the metaphor of an anthill. According to his account, individuals would be guided by a "scientific ideal" that risked reducing humanity to an anthill, where ant-men would advance "toward an apocalypse without eschaton, an apocalypse of the worldly and the human"[171]. This vision mirrors my proposition that the focal point of MSS can be identified in the figure of the αὐτόματον or "automatic subject". The automatic subject "thinks by itself", not in the sense of possessing critical thought that might lead to a potential clash with the hegemonic normative doctrine, but rather "thinks *for* itself" because it has the faculty to even anticipate the desires of the normative structure. It no longer requires education or a structure that upholds the norm since it can adapt autonomously to the hegemonic demands. Technological prowess, not surprisingly, has generated the perfect utopian ideal of a similar subjectivity in AI. The implications of this could significantly disrupt the socio-cultural order for at least three reasons:

1. The αὐτόματον as a particular biopolitical subject correlates historically with a socio-cultural moment characterized by a widespread dominance of technology not due to direct causation by technology itself but rather because the driving forces leading towards a technologically-driven society have induced similar needs for biopower to shape an ideal mindful subject that represents a continued development from the prior disciplinary model and subsequently aligns with the paradigm of biopolitical subjectivation.
2. AI represents the prototype of a perfect worker, tirelessly adaptable to the owner's needs without requiring compensation, constantly learning and self-improving at a rapid pace.
3. Due to the first aspect, AI will become a natural competitor to human subjectivities, establishing a new social standard and becoming the new

170 IDEM, *Discipline and Punish*, cit. p. 136.
171 E. DE MARTINO, *The End of the World*, cit. p. 197.

arbiter of values. A subject will hold value only if comparable to AI capabilities, thus becoming an αὐτόματον.

The αὐτόματον, which is perfected through the hegemonic consolidation of an MSS, is nothing but the culmination of biopower, which, in reaching its zenith, becomes its opposite: a thanatopower. It is no longer a hegemonic force exerted upon living bodies that shapes subjectivities; rather, it is the paroxysm of that same power, which mechanistically demands all bodies to respond uniformly to a certain order, that is a sole (mindful) subjectivity. This leads to the paradox of turning those bodies into machines themselves, i.e., non-living entities. Therefore, the αὐτόματον is the exercise of a thanatopower, a power of death, the indispensable other face of biopower[172].

This progression was far from unforeseeable. Even in the old disciplinary model, competition was a significant factor in valuation. The hypertrophy of technical means has exacerbated this power tendency. The normative system was already based on a value standard of judgments rooted in performance. Those who failed to perform adequately were punished by the system, leading to a trend of power centralization.

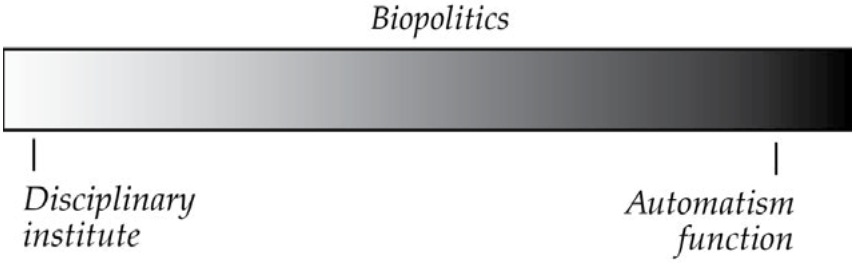

Figure 9 – Spectrum of the Biopolitical apparatus seen in its two major polarizations: the subjectivation as a process conducted by an external disciplinary authority, and subjectivation as a highly autonomous and self-managed process. The latter is the basis for the idea of MSS.

With the reinforcement of biopolitical valorization, the equation began to consider subjects' risks and potentialities, organized according to an "ethic", a value-based ἦθος. In this power form, the economic order directed subjectivity

172 I am proposing here a different interpretation of thanatopower. While for Agamben, the "thanatopower" is based on the ability to legitimately discriminate between forms of human life. In our case, which examines the problem of MSS, thanatopower is to be understood also as a (bio/thanato)political force capable, if necessary, of pushing subjectivities towards a form of (self)mortification, translating the mechanisms of surveillance and discipline internalization to a point where it is the subject's own mind that constructs and maintains, attentively, the system of mortification that embeds subjectivity in the mechanistic schema of this model of mindful attention.

through biological valorizations: selecting the most performing subjects and transforming educational institutions into arenas focused on enhancing qualities deemed valuable.

However, with the advent of AI, the competitiveness standard has irrevocably risen. Technical hypertrophy has birthed an almost invincible competitor, risking the collapse of the social system due to protests from an increasing segment of the excluded population unable to adapt to the new norms. It becomes necessary to neutralize these subjectivities in a manner akin to producing docile and submissive bodies in the old disciplinary system. Yet, in this case, the aim is to induce absolute passivity, a drowsiness that generates inert and passive subjectivities capable not only of uncritically accepting the social model without any sense of resignation or emotional collapse but also of self-regulating through self-techniques that maintain calm, inner peace, and tranquility. These techniques urge subjects to happily adapt to the status quo: water assumes the container's shape without resistance, internalizing every issue while excluding the possibility of social defections, attributing all responsibility to individuals. They must not only maintain calmness but also learn to find happiness in the present moment. The dominant value in this system is precisely the "here and now", the *hic et nunc* that mindfulness practice, since its inception, has presented as the core of the benefit derived from mental presence for the subjects to attain[173].

The critical points at this stage are inherent in the history of Buddhist meditation itself: hegemonic power forms and clashes between different thought systems resisting subject verification and valorization mechanisms have always existed, not just in Europe. These conflicts are discernible not only in ancient India but also in Buddhism, which emerges as a fundamental actor in proposing a fierce protest against the dominant order system, manifested in meditation and active resistance to the normative order of the time. Therefore, what emerges is that mindfulness not only disregards this historical function of Buddhism but also actively shapes soporific and passive subjectivities, willingly accepting the hegemonic order's impositions, contrary to the intents of ancient Buddhists, who sought to shape resistance and active subjects.

To interpret the intricate social dynamics concerning power, institutions, and resistance in the emergence of conflicts related to biopower and the establishment of biopolitical models for the control of social groups, we may rely on the theories proposed by Foucault and Agamben. However, it is necessary to apply a slight amendment to adapt these theories to the burgeoning mindful society while correcting certain potentially flawed assumptions within Agamben's theory.

The trend that Agamben's thought-inspired interpretation of the norm can give to biopolitics is fundamentally legalistic. This tendency might mislead as it reduces biopower to predominantly legal normative functions, surprising Agamben

173 R. Purser, *The Myth of the Present Moment*, "Mindfulness", 2015, 6, pp. 680–686. DOI: 10.1007/s12671-014-0333-z.

himself[174]. In the condition of an increasingly extended and frequent *Ausnahmezustand* within the global geopolitical landscape, there is no apparent transition to a new normative function. Instead, there is a crisis of the rule of law that permanently converts into a "state of siege".

Agamben's interpretation seems tied to the notion of the State as an entity capable of formulating stable laws (legal norms), whose primary characteristic is the firmness of the norm: the law is known to all, it is written, and its application is predictable. In the state of vagueness resulting from the Ausnahmezustand, legal uncertainty prevails[175]. Agamben perceives this as a transformation of the legal order, thus interpreting it as a decline in the way of life, what I have termed ἦθος. Agamben is not mistaken regarding the anthropological movement of society. However, this movement doesn't solely pass through legal force as normative power in jurisprudence is just one of its possible applications, not encompassing all manifestations of biopolitics.

The state of "floating illegality" Agamben often evokes to describe the current social condition is seen as critical because it has lost legal certainty. However, this might imply that it's not a transitional phase or even a novelty in the exercise of power. The expert's discretion regarding norm application in the condition of floating illegality is not entirely new within Western power institutions and beyond.

The doctor, as an expert capable of applying discretionary norms based on specific biomedical epistemic cases, isn't a novelty resulting from the pandemic emergency but was already widely anticipated in disciplinary as well as legal states. The dichotomy between healthy/sick is constructed upon the same normal/anomic principle that also underpins legal rights (legal/illegal) and that is the same principle that found the original antinomy life/death. Hence, the proximity between these related concepts has always been evident.

The issue is not a risk of reverting to a condition where the sick and the illegal overlap, but rather that a vague concept of health and public health, broadly interpreted to encompass mental presence as a standard of healthiness, is de facto imposed as a total social model, implicitly proposed to all actors subjected to this model.

In this circumstance, the problem will no longer be the exclusion and confinement of the mad, the anomic, the sick (treated de jure as illegal elements) into structures managing those expelled from society. Instead, it will be that these individuals, now defined by 'non-conformity' to the capacities of performance and productivity required by a healthy and actively engaging mind in society, are de facto excluded without being coercively 'taken outside'.

174 G. AGAMBEN, *Where Are We Now?: The Epidemic as Politics*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers (Lanham 2021).

175 IDEM, *Homo Sacer*.

In the normative automatism model, the capacity of the automatic or mindful subject to anticipate the needs of the normative system will minimize the force required by authorities to maintain order. Non-mindful subjects will be socially excluded directly by mindful subjects, reducing the need for direct intervention only in extreme cases.

This constitutes a form of dual state (*Doppelstaat*), different from Fraenkel's prediction for describing totalitarian regimes but still conceivable as binary [176]. While the normative state (*de jure*) remains, it is complemented by a mindful state maintained by unwritten social conventions and applied *de facto*.

The *Maßnahmenstaat* theorized by Fraenkel for totalitarian systems is still too weak as it's informal and discretionary. In contrast, in the MSS, the aspect of mindful normativity is factually supported by the biomedical system, which utilizes the concept of extended mental health to describe the terms of a healthy individual, discrediting the anomic whose mental health or judgment (that is: mindful state) will be deemed inadequate for proper and peaceful social coexistence, strategically aligned with the needs of power.

The duality of this system lies in the fact that biomedical authorities merely promulgate the principles of this condition, leaving it to mindful subjects to act against non-mindful ones for exclusion. The dual state isn't rational/arbitrary but merges two aspects of the norm: the biomedical on one side and the ethical (of ἦθος) on the other.

The non-mindful subject will be considered unethical because they are not socially appropriate, a condition that can encompass any element disrupting the emerging social model already largely imposed, ranging from introverted individuals labeled as antisocial or asocial to any critic of the mainstream emitted by an 'expert' source of authority in various domains.

176 E. FRAENKEL, *Der Doppelstaat. Recht und Justiz im „Dritten Reich"*, Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag (Frankfurt am Main 1984).

10. Veridiction and Jurisdiction: the idea of life as a 'value'

We conclude this journey with a consideration regarding the implications of modern biopolitics of mindfulness and the new institution of life.

Veridiction (French: *véridiction*) refers to a process implied in Foucauldian theory, encompassing power dynamics that enable a specific social group invested with a certain type of recognized authority to determine factually what is culturally considered true or false[177]. The implication of this capacity lies in the conceptualization of cultural perception, not as a recognized convention but as an epistemological value established and objective. The obvious consequences are that those who hold veridiction within a certain domain also wield authority connected to conceptions of what is morally or legally right. Moreover, the boundary between science and social norms is increasingly blurring, and the fundamental trend of our time is to replace one doctrinal authority with another, thereby constructing rights and integration systems based on issues validated by science.[178]

Adam Smith used to say that it is not from the benevolence of the baker that we expect our bread but from their self-interest[179]. Similarly, biopower does not act out of personal goodwill towards reintegrated social groups but for an 'economic' interest (in an extended sense) toward that group, masked by an augmented moral sensibility.

There exists a "circular relation" that links truth with systems of power[180]. This connection consequently calls into question the capacity of power systems to determine what is right, normal, or healthy on an 'absolute' basis, thereby exerting a certain degree of control over 'life'. The mechanism that most effectively lends itself to determining social behavior and controlling the concept of 'life' (and, consequently, 'death') on the basis of truth is that of 'nature'.

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177 C. BARKER, *How to tell the political truth: Foucault on new combinations of the basic modes of veridiction*, "Contemporary Political Theory", 2019, 18, pp. 357–378. DOI: 10.1057/s41296-018-0253-0 717. F. EWALD, *Juridiction et véridiction*, "Grief", 2014, 1, pp. 205-209. DOI: 10.3917/grief.141.0205.

178 For instance, as previously mentioned, the acceptance of homosexuality by Western societies did not solely occur due to a shift in collective sensibility but primarily through a change in the 'veridictory' judgment of science. This reevaluation led to reconsiderations regarding assertions of the mental illness of homosexuals, resulting in their decriminalization and progressive integration into legal systems and non-abnormal behavioral classifications, albeit still within an integrated classification schema upheld by the power system. This is the sole prerogative that power reserves for 'normalizing' those previously excluded. However, the same system remains in force when it decides to exclude certain social groups at its discretion.

179 A. SMITH, *An Inquiry Into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, vol. 1, Cannan ed. (Methuen 1776).

180 M. FOUCAULT, *Power…*, cit. p. 132.

Nature is the concept that allows for the imposition of a right based on an incontestable principle: the "*lex naturalis*" is introduced by Hobbes as "a precept, or general rule, found out by reason, by which a man is forbidden to do that which is destructive of his life, or taketh away the means of preserving the same, and to omit that by which he thinketh it may be best preserved"[181].

According to De Martino, nature is something that emerges from human alienation, specifically from the division that presence creates between nature and culture. This perspective fails to acknowledge phenomena such as "culturally conditioned nature"[182], which, within the Western framework that separates nature and culture as distinct realms, appears absurd. De Martino also hypothesizes the risk posed by Western presence in seeking to establish a "technical domination of nature"[183], a dominance that, it is assumed, can only occur following the alienation of presence from nature.

Furthermore, the conceptualization of nature serves as an excellent pretext for establishing a normative order based upon it: the "laws of nature" are unquestionable because nature replaces divinity in its incontestable will to establish an order of worldly matters. This is perceived as even more effective than the old theological system, as nature seems indifferent to human affairs. Thus, there have been repeated attempts to delineate a natural order that derives its strength and efficacy precisely from being inscribed within things (natural law theory: *jūs nātūrāle*).

The implicit characteristics of subjectivation mechanisms necessitated a degree of self-surveillance, self-discipline, and adaptability from individuals conforming to social norms. These aspects were consistently perceived as integral to the education typifying the disciplinary model. Inspired by the Buddhist considerations over death and life, I've theorized the development of the biopolitical system in three acts, not as distinct phases but as progressive additions and enhancements to biopower, which neither erase nor replace prior advancements.

The first act is exclusively founded on the principle of νόμος, interpreted as a principle rooted in νέμω, "distribution", i.e., valorization. The normative order (νόμος) functions to selectively allocate rights to certain social actors while imposing duties, inevitably excluding others. This represents the initial phase of collective management (οἰκονομία) of subjectivities into a population (δῆμος, a term which, like the doublet νόμος/νέμω indicates a "division", cf. the Indo-European roots **deh₂*- "to divide" and **nem*- "to assign" respectively).

Only in a more elaborate phase does the biopolitical order transition to act upon a more indistinct "habituation" (ἔθω), signifying the second stage capable of

181 T. HOBBES, *The Leviathan*, cit. p. XIV.

182 R. PÀSTINA, *Le realtà magiche. Commento al II capitolo de Il Mondo Magico di Ernesto De Martino*, "Rivista sperimentale di freniatria: la rivista dei servizi di salute mentale", 2006, 3, pp. 1–18.

183 E. DE MARTINO, *The End of the World*, cit. p. 242.

shaping not just a simple δῆμος but two orders of subjectivity: the ethical-normative (ἦθος) influencing character and embodied values, no longer merely imposed by law or force, and the historical-cultural (ἔθνος). Under these circumstances, when norms are no longer dictated by an uncontestable authority (and paradoxically, such despotic nature is highly susceptible to resistance) but begin to be taught as a natural fact ("the law of nature is eternal"[184]), external to human will and therefore bound by another type of laws—scientific ones—do the prerequisites for the third stage emerge. This is the stage of αὐτόματον, the passive recipient of incontrovertible norms, i.e., those who 'naturally' conform by following the flow of natural events.

While it might seem exclusive to Western hegemony, this evolutionary power system is observable in the theories of various other cultures, including the Indian culture, which served as the foundation for shaping mindfulness in modern Western culture. Given my aim to demonstrate how the latter constitutes a genuine inversion of protest against biopolitical power, I'll elucidate how conflicts between Buddhists and priestly and royal authorities, as observed in Indian culture, appear distinctly recognizable.

Consider the theory of the development of economic power in three stages (νόμος, ἔθω, αὐτό). These three acts pertain to the management of subjectivities by organized power structures, exhibiting striking parallels in Indian theorizations. Specifically, the dimension of ἦθος/ἔθνος, akin to the two Greek words in question, is characterized by that which is constructed from the ancient Indo-European reflexive pronoun **swé* ("self"), rendered in Sanskrit by words bearing the suffix *sva-*. Notably, there exists an almost etymologically equivalent term to the Greek ἦθος (from ἔθος): the Sanskrit *svadhā*, denoting "custom, habit", or "natural state". Indian thinkers extensively deliberated on the state of nature because determining what constitutes a natural state confers upon the decision-maker the power to ascertain behavioral norms (ἦθος/*svadhā*), the habitus of the population subject to those decision-makers' authority.

Therefore, the three aspects of νόμος, ἔθω, αὐτό exhibit a surprising parallel traceable through three lemmas characterized by the reflexive prefix *sva-*, namely *svadharma* ("law of nature"), *svabhāva* ("natural behavior", "temperament", "disposition"), and finally *svakarma* ("duty", literally "self-action", from *sva* + *karman*).

In Indian texts, these terminologies are often utilized within normative, i.e., biopolitical perspectives, albeit in religious texts. In other cases, they are implicit or explicit in actual normative treaties, such as the well-known Mānavadharmaśāstra, whose primary concern seems to be the biopolitical regulation of social bodies. In this context, we observe that the same principles that promote the emergence of the 'automatic subject' were equally supported.

184 T. HOBBES, *The Leviathan*, cit. XXVII.

A notable illustration of this principle emerges from the Bhagavadgītā (18.45), where it asserts that individuals can achieve perfection by fulfilling their duties, inherently linked to their innate qualities. Within this framework, the term *svakarman* denotes an intrinsic responsibility—an action or behavior (*karman*) intrinsic (*sva-*) to specific human groups. Furthermore, the text advocates the alignment of one's duty with their inherent nature (*svakarmani-rataḥ siddhiṃ yathā vindati tacchṛṇu*), highlighting that deviating from this duty runs contrary to one's essential nature. In other words, the perfected human is the one who can act in perfect conformity with one's own duty.

This concept is strongly related to that of "natural law" (*svadharma*) or "one's natural prescribed duty". Again, in the Bhagavadgītā (3.35) this idea is mentioned in relation to clear normative intents: "it is more favorable to perish while fulfilling one's prescribed duties than to adhere to an alternative code of conduct" (*svadharme nidhanaṃ śreyaḥ paradharmo*). Here the conflict is intended between the natural law, proper to any specific subject (*svadharma*) and the unpleasant eventuality that the subject instead follows an "other law" (*paradharma*), obviously understood as improper.

Ultimately, the concept of an essential, intrinsic, and innate constitution of the subject is reiterated numerous times in Indian texts, often employing the term *svabhāva*. An illustration of this can be found in the Bhagavadgītā (5.14). However, it is noteworthy that these terminologies are extensively employed across various Indian texts, typically with a distinct aim of molding subjectivities or prescribing norms and guiding appropriate behavior. However, undoubtedly, of significant interest concerning the issue of the Soul is the Bhagavadgītā. It is indeed undeniable that this text employs the concept of the soul (literally "life", *jīva*) as an institutionalizing force, which is bent to the needs of the context to compel social bodies to act according to their presumed duty. In the case of the described episode, indeed, the deity attempts to convince the valiant Arjuna to commit a veritable massacre, invoking not only the social duty to which he is called but also the doctrine of karmic retribution as justification for the actions he will be called upon to perform: in fact, for every morally accepted action, there always coincides a karmic reward, even if this action appears reprehensible to us.

After all, the soul-life will persist beyond the dissolution of the body (2.16-18, 20), and therefore the valiant warrior has no reason to worry about the death of his own relatives whom he is called upon to execute. In the second chapter of this famous hymn, we find Arjuna, unable to participate in a battle against his will, but for which a moral duty is imposed upon him. Thus, Kṛṣṇa, who will reveal himself as the avatāra of Viṣṇu, will try to persuade him to fulfill his social duty. In his discourse, Kṛṣṇa also educates Arjuna on very interesting philosophical matters. He introduces an incorporeal element, an inner vital factor within the body (*śarīriṇaḥ*), which, unlike the body destined to die, will persist even after the dissolution of the body: an eternal Soul (*nityaḥ*). This brings us back to the

biopolitical issue of moral duty, as specified in 18.47: "Better to follow one's own nature, even imperfectly, than to perfectly imitate the nature of another. One who performs the duty of their own nature does not err"[185].

From a technical standpoint, a clear correspondence can be drawn between the role of *svakarma*(*n*), "one's own action, duty, right conduct", and the state of αὐτόματον, posited as the culmination of biopower in the Mānavadharmaśāstra. The parallel is also etymological since αὐτό- ("self") is another way Greek denotes reflexivity, while the suffix -ματον pertains to μένος, thought. The automatic subject is one who, as previously stated, "thinks for oneself" and consequently acts by oneself (*svakarma*), producing an action that is "correct", or "proper". After all, the law of nature is inevitable, thus, "Ignorance of the law of nature excuseth no man"[186].

In the context of ancient India as briefly outlined here, the mechanism of authority was, as one might expect, primarily engaged in shaping subjectivities[187]. However, it employed forms of legitimization and knowledge transmission that conflicted with the ascetic traditions of Buddhism and contemplative practice to a degree that compels us to consider, in the struggle for the primacy of truth-telling, that Buddhists, at least initially, adhered to an ascetic model that rejected authority and the concept of law[188]. While meditation can arguably be categorized among bodily techniques and self-discipline practices, it is debatable whether such self-discipline was initially intended as conducive to processes of subjectivation, thus to the formation of social actors in accordance with normative desires, particularly considering not only the early Buddhist philosophy of non-identity (*anattā*) but also the opposition by early Buddhists to the idea of a stable norm dictated by established power structures.

Recent studies have begun to clearly detect a change in the social structure and political order dictated by the affirmation of the technological and digital model: "just as there has been a radical change in the processes of digitization of lives, there has been a process of transformation of bodily presence and languages in the realm of politics"[189].

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185 Original: *śreyān svadharmo viguṇaḥ paradharmāt svanuṣṭhitāt; svabhāva-niyataṃ karma kurvan nāpnoti kilbiṣam.*

186 T. Hobbes, *The Leviathan*, cit. XXVII.

187 F. Squarcini, *Tradens, Traditum, Recipiens: Introductory Remarks on the Semiotics, Pragmatics and Politics of Tradition*, in F. Squarcini (ed.), "Boundaries, Dynamics and Construction of Traditions in South Asia", Anthem Press (New York 2011), pp. 11–38. Idem, *Traditions against Tradition: Criticism, Dissent and the Struggle for the Semiotic Primacy of Veridiction*, in F. Squarcini (ed.), "Boundaries, Dynamics and Construction of Traditions in South Asia", Anthem Press (New York 2011), pp. 437–484.

188 F. Divino, *An Anthropological Outline of the Sutta Nipāta*. Cf. also A. Di Lenardo & F. Divino, *The World and the Desert: A Comparative Perspective on the "Apocalypse" between Buddhism and Christianity*, "Buddhist–Christian Studies", 2023, 43.1, pp. 141–162. DOI: 10.1353/bcs.2023.a907576.

189 V. Auriemma, D. Battista, S. Quarta, *Digital Embodiment as a Tool for Constructing the Self in Politics*, "Societies", 2023, 13, No. 261, pp. 1–17: 6. DOI: 10.3390/soc13120261.

The theory I aim to propose here suggests that the society of technology has not been solely generated by technological advancements. Rather, it has been shaped both by the increasing technical possibilities pursued by science and the growing convergence of the social body towards what I define as an "automatic subject". These developments are dictated by a common factor inherent to both, indicating a mutual causality between them. This common factor lies within the very ideas that have prevailed throughout the course of Western thought[190]. Implicit in the notion of self-improvement was the embryonic birth of technology as a cultural model designed to:

1. implement a means (*technics*) capable of indefinitely achieving objectives, and
2. self-improve as it was utilized, thereby multiplying the achievable and attainable objectives.

This model, on one hand, facilitated human societies utilizing various techniques in alleviating the toils of labor and the fears of illness and death. However, on the other hand, it brought about a stage envisioned by theorists of the society of technology[191], who pondered the risks of the hypertrophic use of this tool, wherein the means would supplant the end. Technics, employed in various forms by powers striving to achieve their objectives, was enhanced to the extent that it imposed itself as the sole universal purpose.

This inclination can be traced back to the very birth of Western thought and should not be perceived merely as the emergence of technology itself. Technical thought is applicable not only to techno-science but also to the social and cultural models that have adapted to these standards, namely those driven by the intention to achieve maximum results with minimal means.

Evidence of the long-standing presence of a tendency toward automatism and technics in an extended sense within Western thought (not solely focused on technology but encompassing the technical mindset itself, as I have recently outlined its principles) can be found in numerous traditions that either anticipate or assert mechanistic ideas as the foundation of natural forms. The notion of humans as perfect machines implicitly conceals a fundamental issue: if the human being is a machine, their life can be reduced to the same principles of mechanics and efficiency expected from machines.

A pivotal point in this development is the formulation of the concept of "Characteristica Universalis" by Leibniz. According to Leibniz's project, it aimed to transform reasoning into computation[192]. This renders the Characteristica

190 Cf. E. SEVERINO, *Il destino della tecnica*, Rizzoli (Bologna 1998). U. GALIMBERTI, *Psiche e techne. L'uomo nell'età della tecnica*, Feltrinelli (Milan 2016).

191 L. DEMICHELIS, *Sociologia della tecnica e del capitalism: Ambiente, uomini e macchine nel Tecnocene*, Franco Angeli (Milan 2020).

192 W. RISSE, *Die Characteristica Universalis bei Leibniz*, "Studi Internazionali di Filosofia", 1969, 1, pp. 107–116. DOI: 10.5840/StudIntFil196916.

Universalis a crucial step toward Artificial Intelligence[193], as, once constructed, according to Leibniz, there would be no more need for discussion between two philosophers than between two calculators. Initially, Leibniz intended to construct the Characteristica through three steps.

Firstly, it was necessary to analyze and decompose complex notions by means of definitions, aiming to arrive at an alphabet of human thoughts, a catalog of primitive notions that could not be rendered clearer through further definitions. Each of these primitive notions was then to be assigned an appropriate character. Finally, the rules that would allow the combination of these primitive notions by operating on their characters needed to be determined.

In the allure of contemplative practice within the techno-medical and protocol-driven model of Western civilization, Mindfulness has emerged as a set of phases and standardized procedures that can be administered to subjects. However, as evidenced in prior studies[194], the elements on which this technique focuses do not concern the subject's crisis but rather its reinforcement. In other words, while in Buddhist meditation the aim is to deconstruct subjectivity by 'turning off' (the metaphor of 'extinguishing fire' is frequently adopted in these cases) all those mechanisms that today we would define as processes of subjectivation, including semantic primacy and socio-cultural habituation to certain norms and laws, mindfulness seems instead to seek primarily to avoid those elements that disturb the subject's tranquility, resulting in an egolatric mechanism of increasing subjectivation, contrary to traditional contemplative intentions.

This has been particularly noted in relation to phases of the 'subject's crisis' indicated both in earliest texts and by modern traditional meditators as genuine crises of a "world-ending" nature[195]. In these phases, reachable only in the deepest contemplative absorptions, one experiences a traumatic and bewildering transition, leading to an emptying of the semantic-normative categories with which we typically categorize the world. In ethnographic interviews conducted with mindfulness practitioners, these forms of "crises" are explicitly experienced as unpleasant. Mindfulness teachers encourage students to avoid compromising the state of calm and inner peace, which is instead indicated as the sole and central objective of interest.

Other studies label these phases as "adverse events"[196] to contemplative practice, a terminology that clearly indicates how in mindfulness, any form of

193 H. Pape, *La Phénoménologie de Charles S. Peirce*, "Études Phénoménologiques", 1989, 5.9/10, pp. 113-146. DOI: 10.5840/etudphen198959/105.

194 F. Divino, *Mindful Apocalypse*.

195 Ibidem & Idem, *In this world or the next*.

196 Cf. D. D. Binda, C. M. Greco, N. E, Morone, *What Are Adverse Events in Mindfulness Meditation?* "Global Advances in Health and Medicine", 2022, 11. DOI: 10.1177/2164957X221096640. See also A. Aizik-Reebs, A. Shoham, A. Bernstein, *First, do no harm: An intensive experience sampling study of adverse effects to mindfulness training*, "Behaviour Research and Therapy", 2021, 145, No. 103941. DOI: 10.1016/j.brat.2021.103941.

disruption of tranquility is viewed as unwelcome to the process. Mindfulness, in general, is exclusively focused on establishing forms of tranquility and inner peace directed toward a stronger form of subjectivation: the individual shaped by mindful practice will be highly adaptable to environmental and social conditions, and indeed adaptability or "acceptance" is often presented as a virtue[197].

The criticism that could be leveled against this model precisely aligns with the argument previously posited by Purser[198]: it perfectly conforms to the aims of neoliberal and capitalist societies[199], wherein it is even desirable as a generalized model of subjectivation of social masses (a MSS) that sees not so much in mindfulness itself but in what it represents the ideal subject to promote (docility, strong adaptive capacity to societal needs, prediction of models, and improvement of performance). As mentioned earlier, the intentions of the MSS perfectly coincide with the trends of technological society, hence the convergence between the two models and the potential blending and integration of the two.

> As one such technology of the self, mindfulness draws upon diverse forms of institutional expertise to govern and manage behaviours. […] Instead of encouraging transformative action within communities and societies, wellness practices generally promote the idea that health and wellbeing are problems that are exclusively within our control, rather than a product of the political and economic contexts that bolster and maintain our destructive society.[200]

In the old normative order, discipline and "correct training" had to be imposed by an external mentor and evaluated through the examination device[201]. For this reason, the panopticon model was the pinnacle of efficiency for the type of control desired in the surveillance society, therefore the general tendency was to "induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power"[202]. It is not difficult to understand the subsequent development. In MSS training this is optimized by having each individual subject introject the principles, while panopticism is replaced by the omni-vision of a mindful 'the inner eye'. This mindful state allows the subject to be monitored of

197 S. C. Hayes & K. G. Wilson, *Mindfulness: Method and Process*, "American Psychologicl Association", 2003, D12, pp. 161-165. DOI: 10.1093/clipsy/bpg018.

198 R. Purser, *McMindfulness: How mindfulness became the new capitalist spirituality*, Repeater (London 2019).

199 M. V. Wrenn, *Corporate Mindfulness Culture and Neoliberalism*, "Review of Radical Political Economics", 2022, 54.2, pp. 153-170. DOI: 10.1177/04866134211063521.

200 S. Badr, *Re-Imagining Wellness in the Age of Neoliberalism*, "New Sociology: Journal of Critical Praxis", 2022, 3, pp. 1-10: 6. DOI: 10.25071/2563-3694.66.

201 M. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, cit. p. 184.

202 Ibid., p. 201.

oneself. With the announced marriage between mindfulness and AI devices, all this will be further implemented and perfected[203].

This leads us to close the open circle at the beginning of this chapter, concerning the transformation of power structures (specifically, the evolution of biopower). AI possesses characteristics that, in this sense, allow us to clearly identify its predictable outcomes that will converge in the increase of forms of power capable of producing subjectivation and political management[204]. This was already discernible in the previous developments of this technology, and consequently in the concept of technics in general, even before generative AI had established itself as it has in the current context in which I am articulating these reflections.

> When peoples are no longer capable of living within sacred time, humans are reduced to mere mortals, and the sacred actions of life become τέχναι, primarily tasked with ensuring and safeguarding biological development. Such a task can then only be fulfilled by the civilization of technology; however, this civilization itself aims at a form of transcending the biological constraints of human existence: the enhancement of τέχνη can indefinitely prolong human life and can imbue a different significance to one's birth. Yet, τέχνη extends mortal life infinitely: by preventing biological death and satisfying every desire, it alters the dimension grounded in the mortal essence of humanity, but it does not bring about the demise of the foundation of mortality.[205]

The social implications of the introduction of the Artificial Intelligence can be easily considered relevant data for the type of reflections I am carrying out here on the automatic subject and on the MSS.

The relationship between artificial intelligence systems and social entities, whether characterized by a competitive dynamic—where subjectivities must conform to machine standards—or an enhancing one —where subjectivities collaborate with machines to enhance human capabilities[206]—results ultimately in a consistent outcome: processes of subjectification are directed by the same principle governing the ideal machine.

> The combination of personalization and participation represents a significant phenomenon in contemporary political communication, emphasizing the convergence of two crucial dynamics: the adaptation of

203 F. Divino, *From Meditation to Techno-Mindfulness: On the Medicalization of Contemplative Practices and Future Prospects*, "Histories", 2024, 4.1, pp. 125-143. DOI: 10.3390/histories4010008.

204 S. M. Ali, S. Dick, S. Dillon, M. L. Jones, J. Penn, R. Staley, *Histories of artificial intelligence: a genealogy of power*. "BJHS Themes", 2023, 8, pp. 1-18. DOI: 10.1017/bjt.2023.15.

205 E. Severino, *Essenza del Nichilismo*, cit. p. 236.

206 L. Demichelis, *Macchine intelligenti o tecnologie della conoscenza?*, "Sistemi Intelligenti", 2017, 3, pp. 559–578. DOI: 10.1422/88509.

> political messages to the specific characteristics and preferences of individuals (personalization) and the active encouragement of individuals to participate in the political process (participation).[207]

The schema previously outlined in Figure 9 requires an annex to be added for completion: the two extremes of the biopolitical pendulum do not imply the overcoming of the former in favor of the latter model. The automatic subject, the outcome of mindful subjectivation, retains within itself the principle of the disciplinary model. However, it has fully internalized it and requires minimal (if any) management from external entities. In the culmination of this system, when AI will undertake the functions of control and adjustment of the self-disciplinary model, thereby providing directives to the subject-automatons to become increasingly mindful by algorithmically adapting to their individual peculiarities, offering exercises and guidelines for 'internalizable' lifestyles that increasingly conform to the expectations of the technological society, there will also be a complete shift from the disciplinary biopolitical model to self-disciplining. As previously mentioned, this model proves significantly more effective than its predecessor insofar as the economic management (the management of social subjectivities) is entrusted to the subjects themselves, capable of self-regulation or, where directives are needed, these would come from equally automated systems capable of achieving optimal results through seemingly minimal corrections to their lifestyles.

νόμος	ἔθω	αὐτό(ματον)
svadharma	***svabhāva***	***svakarma***
Natural law	Social behavior	Automatism

Table 1. Three acts of the development of biopolitics through the economic apparatus (οἰκονομία). The aspect of the social behavior includes both the ethical-normative and the cultural aspect of habits and common customs (ἦθος/ἔθνος). These aspects, dependent on the categorial distribution and organization of norms (νέμω) are taken to the extreme in the MSS.

Finally, everything will be made possible by the naturalistic message which has long presented certain behavioral models similar to a mechanism—and pertaining to the ideal model of the man-machine—as the most "natural" (the human as a perfect natural machine) or the healthiest (optimization of human productivity and efficiency) that a subject can pursue. The exact same model that we have also seen applied in other cultural contexts uses the naturalistic device here as a function of biopolitical improvement. A natural law (*svadharma*) implies the existence of a normal social behavior or intrinsic human essence (*svabhāva*) which in turn implies the expectation of a proper way of acting, a natural duty (*svakarma*), a

207 V. AURIEMMA et al., *Digital Embodiment as a Tool…*, cit. p. 6.

"self-action" (*sva-karman*), i.e., an automatism: you don't need someone to explain your natural duty since, if it is 'natural', everyone expects you to automatically act in accordance with your natural essence.

In the given context (Table 1), both the initial and final phases exhibit a similarity in the general principle, as the initial regulatory value dictates that everything can be exclusively categorized according to the dichotomy of normal/abnormal, healthy/sick, and ultimately, life/death. The ethical framework and ethnic variations have facilitated the evolution of this principle into more intricate forms while preserving its fundamental dichotomous nature. However, the characteristic of automatism introduces a radical shift, no longer maintaining exclusivity as in the initial normative order, but becoming self-inclusive. Individuals themselves will identify as fitting or unfit for the system based on their ability to achieve the Mindful state, corresponding in this instance to the normalized state.

The first instance in which the concept of automatism is employed to describe forms of human behavior can be traced back to the realm of experimental psychology pioneered by the philosopher and physician Pierre Janet[208].

Janet observed "lower forms" underlying certain human behaviors that propelled individuals toward adopting automatic behaviors—actions generated and performed without full awareness (*Automatisme Psychologique*). With this theory, Janet anticipated the notion of the subconscious. Acts performed mechanically, devoid of active consciousness, may encompass all habitual actions of humans, including anthropologically construed bodily techniques. Any repetitive or habitual action, a product of internalized learning, is executed by the individual in an 'automatic' manner.

This theory enabled Janet to make significant strides in the field of psychopathology as well, investigating phenomena such as somnambulism and occurrences during cataleptic states, memory loss, and other subconscious behaviors induced by hypnosis. Presently, this theory proves to be highly valuable in explaining the gradual evolution of biopolitical forms toward the MSS.

Mindful subjects progressively self-induce a more predominant state of behavioral automatism and suspension of judgment. The objectives of compliance pursued by mindfulness practice imply the transformation of subjectivities not so much into docile bodies, as seen in the old disciplinary system, but into acquiescent, lethargic bodies capable of optimal action and performance. This capability doesn't arise from education by a repressive system but from active and joyful participation in a form of self-discipline, which is not perceived as repressive at all. Such methodologies employed in mindfulness accentuate positive and relaxing experiences while simultaneously encouraging the induction of a

208 P. JANET, *L'automatisme psichologique: Essai de psychologie expérimentale sur les formes inférieures de l'activité humaine*, L'Harmattan (Paris 2005).

'peaceful' adaptation to social expectations, internalized in a subconscious and automated form of behavior.

There are numerous reasons to consider the issue of the αὐτόματον as a thanatological problem. As I have observed thus far, it is a thanatological problem because it involves the control over the conceptual opposite of death, namely life. As a biopolitical instrument, we have seen that the αὐτόματον is not merely a Western issue, recently brought to prominence due to the advent of AI, but one with much more archaic roots, and it is also a problem discussed by Indian thinkers. In the struggle against institutions exercising veridictive capacities, and thus socio-cultural 'power' over the semantic domains of life and death, Buddhism aspires to an anthropotechnique that liberates the subject from the yoke of these juridical-semantic norms, transcending the life/death dualism and, consequently, the automatisms that the socio-cultural system still anchors to those semantic domains. My critique of Mindfulness in the form of MSS should thus be contextualized within the paradoxical inversion that modern society has achieved with contemplative practice, transforming it from an instrument for liberation from thanatopower into an instrument of biopower (control over 'life'), and consequently also thanatopolitical.

However, Buddhism can also be useful in deconstructing the αὐτόματον in another way, by serving as an intellectual stimulus to understand how the αὐτόματον is not a problem in itself but becomes one only when applied to modern technics. Outside of this domain of power, the αὐτόματον is not something 'alien' to the human but is rather a constitutive part of it. Today, it is something we do not understand because the αὐτόματον causes dismay and fear—fears of death, societal collapse, and transformations so radical as to resemble, indeed, an annihilation without return.

For now, Buddhists present us with some fundamental problems that I invite us to address:

1) The difference between consciousness (*viññāṇa*) and awareness (*sati*). The former is a mechanism of discerning reality, upon which personal identity, the designation of conventional identities to 'things of the world', and recognition fundamentally depend. Self-awareness and recognition are two interconnected mechanisms that Buddhists intend to dismantle. Awareness, on the other hand, is immediate; it does not place an obstructive element between the perception of the 'thing' and the self that discerns it, but rather is a form of wisdom that is also non-dual, non-divisive.
2) The way consciousness functions is 'automatic'. There is a degree of spontaneity that permeates sentient beings and, to some extent, can also be extended to inanimate things. Everything is conscious insofar as it adheres to 'spontaneous' laws of organization. Just as humans impose their organizing will on the world, segmenting entities into 'things' to which

they assign 'nominal' identities, everything in the world is organized by this 'automatic' form.

3) Automatism oscillates between two extremes, but they are both fundamentally aspects of 'consciousness'. The maximum unconscious extreme is when the organizing force cannot recognize itself as such. The other extreme is self-consciousness. Thus, Buddhists dismantle our conception of consciousness because they fundamentally trace it to a universal, yet also problematic, force.[209]

The first step we must take is the deconstruction of the myth of consciousness. To do this, we should first turn our gaze to the East, and only after completing this 'deconstruction' will should look back at the great thinkers who, starting from a completely different conception of consciousness, have had to confront a gigantic problem. Concurrently, in the advancement of technics that permeates all of Western history, they entered into a relationship with those processes of techno-scientific empowerment that benefited from a certain idea of consciousness, allowing it to be reproduced, reiterated, automated, and extended to the point of establishing a symbiosis with the same technical power that managed the fate of Western civilization, today fully within the framework of the civilization of technics predicted by Severino.

This was made possible mainly due to the foundation of a 'technical consciousness' that, unlike the 'technics of consciousness' adopted by the Indian thinkers I examined, created the perfect symbiosis: techno-consciousness was initially, and still is, a human factor, in the sense that it was of and for the human.

209 On this latter point, I invite us to build the theoretical reflection. In my last work, I addressed the problem from a radically different perspective. I am referring to the chapter "Spontaneously-arose Images" that I authored for the volume "The Apparent Image". Cf. F. DIVINO, *The Apparent Image: The Phenomenon, the Void, the Invisible*, Diodati (Padua 2024): pp. 151-176. In this chapter, I delved into the analysis of the Buddhist concept of *bhavaṅga*, the 'suspended consciousness', which I have deemed comparable to Janet's idea of psychological automatism. In these states of suspended consciousness, which Buddhists acknowledge as present in the natural cognitive processes of humans, resides not only the demonstration of their remarkable capacity for psychological analysis but also the awareness that certain forms of automatism are implicit in 'sentient beings'. Indeed, automatism is more common than moments of full consciousness, and since it constitutes a form of organization and (self-)management of entities, why should it be considered the antithesis of life or being? Therefore, we are not interested in the 'how', but rather the 'why'. My aim was to philosophically deconstruct the myth of AI, but also that of consciousness. The two are inevitably correlated. The philosophical tools for such an endeavor have been present in the West for a long time: from the concept of 'psychological automatism' in Pierre Janet's work to Gilles Deleuze's brilliant insights on "Difference and Repetition". Indeed, they have been so for quite some time. However, also by looking elsewhere, particularly to the Buddhist world and the thought of early Buddhism and its initial developments, the problem of consciousness is already addressed from the perspective of an 'automatism', which compels us to drastically reconsider its premises. It is the myth of consciousness that is deconstructed, and with it, the AI that today is rapidly elevating to a level of disquiet and disorientation precisely by virtue of this myth that transforms and magnifies it.

Techno-consciousness first settled in the Western human, where it still resides today, and only then could it be extended and autonomized in forms that, in light of its genesis, must be seen as the triumph of humanism, placing AI as more than a simple 'human creation' (though it would be more appropriate to speak of a 'product'), but rather as the humanist par excellence[210].

There is no substantial difference between the physiological need to drink, 'feeling thirsty', which spontaneously and uncontrollably arises in our mind, and imagining, with an act of will, a glass of water even when we are not thirsty. The fundamental point of ascetic practice is to 'reverse' these tendencies, disrupting them to the point of de-automatizing them. Can one, paradoxically, control their own thirst? Ascetics in antiquity undertook rigorous bodily discipline operated from these premises, but Buddhism tells us that total alienation from these mechanisms is not possible. Rather, the crux of the problem lies in the perception of 'separateness' that isolates one's presence from other conscious presences, or even a presence from an automatism. Two automatisms do not face the issue of perceiving themselves as separate: it is presence that initially poses the problem of its autonomy from other presences or from other 'things in the world', which continue to operate 'automatically'. Thus, for Buddhists, it is not a matter of strengthening presence, nor of nullifying it. It is a problem that involves the difference between mediated and immediate perception, with the fundamental point that for Buddhists, immediacy also entails an awareness of the fundamental unity of consciousnesses.

Specifically, it is necessary to recover the notions of consciousness, self-consciousness, and recognition. Hence, *viññāṇa* is not 'consciousness' understood as 'self-awareness', but rather a form of cognitive organization based on separations: to know (*jānāti*) through divisions (*vi-*). What I have chosen to interpret as semantic cognition (*saññā*) is, according to the Buddhists themselves, a re-cognition[211]. The process of re-cognition is, in some respects, the opposite of discernment. While discernment organizes by dividing, recognition proceeds by recompositing: putting together (*saṃ-*) to know (*jānāti*).

Let us return to our inquiry into mindfulness within the context of Western hegemonic culture. We have seen how the interaction between the thanatological

210 In "Spontaneously-arose Images", I preliminarily addressed all relevant issues, exploring the problem of cognitive automatism from a Buddhist perspective and comparing it with the theories of Janet, as well as the latest studies by Atlan. The concept of cognitive automatism requires further examination: Buddhists had already intuited that cognition and consciousness are procedural phenomena, and that our perception of the world, as well as our thinking, arise from a succession of 'images' that spontaneously appear to our cognition. We are under the illusion that we guide this sequence of emerging and appearing images, but the reality is that we oscillate between two extremes: a total passivity or 'absence' (i.e., 'death'), where automatism is fully operative, and a complete 'presence', where we recognize what appears. In both cases, however, it is not our consciousness, that is, our 'presence' (i.e., 'life') that manages this automation; rather, it is simply self-aware of its role.

211 Cf. IDEM, *Dualism and Psychosemantics*.

powers driven by cultural normativity and the technological advancements led, in the specific case of mindfulness, to the MSS, where the problems of life and death in the Early Buddhist psychology and modern Western society converge in the form of bio-/thanatopower. This evolution denotes a fundamental shift in the paradigm of biopolitics, leading to a reconfiguration of subjectivation towards a socio-cultural framework fostering drowsiness and automatism. The processes of inculturation and transculturation, transforming Buddhist practices into biomedical techniques, serve as critical markers of this transformation[212]. Mindfulness emerges as a mechanism facilitating social discipline and foresight into the exigencies of power. This new trajectory, reminiscent of the historical transition from disciplinary power to biopolitics, underscores the MSS as a contemporary manifestation of biopower tailored to conform to the prevailing norms of technoscience.

This cultivation, condensed into the mindfulness ethos, propagates a value system that accentuates the significance of the present moment, tranquility, and adaptability to the established order, reflecting the imperatives of a technics-driven culture. Despite its appearance of inclusivity, this model operates covertly, serving economic interests and perpetuating normative structures. The intricate interplay between power and truth, epitomized by nature as a legitimizing force, underscores the formulation of norms and values which will tend to promote subjects prone to the mindful ethos and to discredit those who lack adaptive capabilities and passive acceptance of the increasingly competitive social norms, to the point of making the mindful subject the 'norm' of healthcare and therefore of an acceptable human standard.

Formerly a practice rooted in contemplation, mindfulness now reinforces subjectivity by prioritizing tranquility over critical deconstruction, aligning with the requisites of neoliberal capitalist societies for compliant and adaptable individuals. The convergence between the MSS and technological trajectories suggests a potential integration, shedding light on the interconnected evolution of power and societal norms in modern culture.

In this regard, it is essential to recognize that any instance aimed at the 'economic' management of life, such as those discussed in the previous sections, necessarily requires the establishment of a concept of death. Consequently, biopolitical management of life also entails managing death. In this context, Indian thought, within the dialectic that opposes orthodoxy to heterodoxy, debates the idea of automatism and natural automatism or inherent nature, specifically in terms of life and death. It values the idea of life or 'one's own life' in the sense of 'properly conducted', while consequently denigrating everything else as 'death'.

However, in the Buddhist psychological framework, although the psychic identity is recognized as perfectly coinciding with the bio-physical dimension of the subject (the body and its worldly experience), this does not mean that the

212 IDEM, *From Meditation to Techno-Mindfulness.*

subject's real being can be in any way reduced to corporeality. In Buddhism, as in all major ascetic philosophical traditions, the body is a burden, a cage, an uncomfortable obstacle to liberation. Ancient Indian ascetic traditions posited: the soul is one thing, the body another (*aññaṃ jīvaṃ aññaṃ sarīraṃ*). When speaking of the soul, they use the term *jīva*, whose Indo-European root is connected to the sense of "life" in its purest and most uncontaminated form. As previously said, from the same Indo-European root we have the Latin *vīvus* and the Greek *bíos* (βίος). For the body, they do not use *kāya*, a term more closely associated with corporeality, but rather *sarīra*, from the Sanskrit *śarīra*, which implies decomposition, destined to deteriorate, to break down (root *śṛ-*).

Buddhism, however, overturns this paradigm, and the reason for its dissent from other ascetic philosophies has often been misunderstood. What Buddhism rejects in this definition is the notion that being can be expressed in words. To define the soul as 'something' distinct from something else is to semantically objectify it. The profound and radical idea in Buddhism is that being is neither idea nor non-idea, as it is before and beyond any idea. Thus, invoking *jīva* by calling it *jīva* merely summons the appearance of something substantialized, a living idea, but not the inexpressible truth. Hence, it is sometimes, and mistakenly, thought that Buddhism asserts that the soul and body are the same (*taṃ jīvaṃ taṃ sarīraṃ*). Actually, the Buddha denied that the body and soul were either the same or different entities. Only by understanding the subtle semantic philosophy of the Buddha can we grasp the rationale behind his reasoning.

> *atha ca panāhaṃ na vadāmi: 'taṃ jīvaṃ taṃ sarīran'ti vā 'aññaṃ jīvaṃ aññaṃ sarīran'ti vā'ti.*
>
> Nevertheless, I do not say: "the soul and the body are the same" nor "the soul and the body are two different things".[213]

The Buddha denies that things originate from themselves (*sayaṃ-kata*), but also that they are generated by factors other than themselves (*paraṃ-kata*). This perspective aligns strikingly with the thought of Emanuele Severino, who posits that no entity is self-originated nor can generate other entities. Like Severino, the Buddha also rejects the idea that a God generates the totality of things, or more explicitly, that God is the cause of all things (*sabbaṃ issara-nimmāṇa-hetu*).

Thus, I must spend some conclusive words on the concept of *nibbāna*. Is it ultimate death? Is it transcendence from death and life? The condition of joy resulting from the attainment of *nibbāna* is defined as the highest good (*nibbānaṃ paramaṃ sukhaṃ*), but there are various ways this highest good is attained. Certainly, the term indicates an extinguishment, analogous to the extinguishing of a lamp's flame, and it is no coincidence that the Buddha uses the metaphor of fire,

213 Jāliyasutta, DN 7.

stating, for example, that everything is ablaze [214], burning due to passions (*rāga*), hatred (*dosa*), and illusions (*moha*). In this sense, *nibbāna* appears as a transcendence of human limits, or rather, of the condition in which the human being is a victim of oneself due to ignorance, proceeding through a careful deconstruction (*visaṃkhara*) of those psychobiological mechanisms that enable such subjugation. Once these constituents are identified, the awakened one is no longer conditioned by them. At this point, they are no longer prolific (*nippapañca*) of those mechanisms that would typically lead to subjugation.

Figure 10 – Birth of the Buddha – Exhibit in the Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, USA. This artwork is old enough so that it is in the public domain. Photography was permitted in the museum without restriction.

Even more remarkable is the connection between the condition of awakening, the overcoming of worldly conditioning, and the state of immortality (*amata*). However, it cannot be said that the Buddha becomes immortal in the Christian sense; rather, he has "won a psychological victory over the inevitable phenomenon of death. The experience of death is present only when one identifies oneself with

214 Y. KARUNADASA, *Early Buddhist Teachings*, cit. p. 124.

what is subject to death"[215]. Regarding immortality, Buddhism asserts that it "cannot be the perpetuation of a self-identity into eternity. From the Buddhist perspective, immortality is what results from the elimination of the ego-illusion"[216].

In the West, this view appears inconceivable, where immortality is conceived as the opposite of overcoming the identity instance, but rather as its perpetual reiteration through technique. It is inconceivable that immortality involves the reunification of the self with the All (which does not mean becoming non-self or ceasing to "be", but rather fully living this being), because the West has progressively denied the truth of the incontrovertible for pragmatic reasons.

Grief for the death of the Buddha – section of *Figure* 2.

This is the conclusion of our intellectual journey on the theme of death in archaic Buddhist thought, but the research is not finished, and this is only one contribution of many that open new doors for the investigation of this fundamental theme.

I thank Ines Testoni and the *Master in Death Studies* of the University of Padua for having welcomed this research.

215 Ibid., p. 127.
216 Ibidem.

Afterword

Laura Liberale

Rappelez-vous l'objet que nous vîmes, mon âme,
Ce beau matin d'été si doux:
Au détour d'un sentier une charogne infâme
Sur un lit semé de cailloux,
Le ventre en l'air, comme une femme lubrique,
Brûlante et suant les poisons,
Ouvrait d'une façon nonchalante et cynique
Son ventre plein d'exhalaisons.
Le soleil rayonnait sur cette pou
Comme afin de la cuire à point,
Et de rendre au centuple à la grande Nature
Tout ce qu'ensemble elle avait joint;
Et le ciel regardait la carcasse superbe
Comme une fleur s'épanouir.
La puanteur était si forte, que sur l'herbe
Vous crûtes vous évanouir.
Les mouches bourdonnaient sur ce ventre putride,
D'où sortaient de noirs bataillons
De larves, qui coulaient comme un épais liquide
Le long de ces vivants haillons.
Tout cela descendait, montait comme une vague
Ou s'élançait en pétillant;
On eût dit que le corps, enflé d'un souffle vague,
Vivait en se multipliant.
Et ce monde rendait une étrange musique,
Comme l'eau courante et le vent,
Ou le grain qu'un vanneur d'un mouvement rythmique
Agite et tourne dans son van.
Les formes s'effaçaient et n'étaient plus qu'un rêve,
Une ébauche lente à venir,
Sur la toile oubliée, et que l'artiste achève
Seulement par le souvenir.
Derrière les rochers une chienne inquiète
Nous regardait d'un œil fâché,
Epiant le moment de reprendre au squelette
Le morceau qu'elle avait lâché.
Et pourtant vous serez semblable à cette ordure,
A cette horrible infection,
Etoile de mes yeux, soleil de ma nature,
Vous, mon ange et ma passion!
Oui! telle vous serez, ô la reine des grâces,
Après les derniers sacrements,

Quand vous irez, sous l'herbe et les floraisons grasses,
Moisir parmi les ossements.
Alors, ô ma beauté! dites à la vermine
Qui vous mangera de baisers,
Que j'ai gardé la forme et l'essence divine
De mes amours décomposés!

The moment when, under the merciless rays of the sun, the truth of decay suddenly unfolds before an individual: the unhealthy flower of an animal carcass blooming obscenely, the rot of the belly teeming with buzzing flies, the putrid sewage of larvae oozing from shreds of flesh. The romantic stroll is irreparably spoiled by the sight, by the horrid, distressing certainty that even the beautiful body of the beloved will undergo such decay and that the grace that moves it will be overwhelmed by the teeming, writhing matter in decomposition. This disturbing scene is "staged" by Baudelaire in *Une Charogne*.

Now, let us imagine that a third illustrious figure joins the stroll: Siddhārtha Gautama, "the silent one" of the Śākya clan, better known as the Buddha, the "Awakened One", the one who, precisely from the concrete vision of suffering, decay, and transience, drew the unwavering determination to seek the truth. Let us imagine the whole scenario as a kind of fictional re-enactment of the teaching of the nine cemetery contemplations in the *Mahāsatipaṭṭhānasutta*: "In addition, monks, as if he were to observe a body lying in a charnel ground, one, two, or three days dead, swollen, livid, and oozing with matter; or a body devoured by crows, hawks, vultures, dogs, jackals, and various kinds of worms; or a body reduced to a skeleton with some flesh and blood attached; or a body reduced to a skeleton smeared with blood, held together by the tendons; or a body reduced to a skeleton with no more flesh and blood, held together only by the tendons; or a body reduced to disconnected bones scattered in all directions; or a body of which only the bones remain, white as conch shells; or a body reduced to a pile of bones lying there for more than a year; or a body reduced to bones rotted and crumbled away: he applies and focuses on the body, thinking: "this body, indeed, is subject to such a natural law, will undergo such a process, and cannot escape it". Thus, he abides practicing the contemplation of the body in the body, abides practicing the contemplation of the body externally, and abides practicing both internally and externally the contemplation of the body. He abides contemplating the factors of birth in the body, abides contemplating the factors of the dissolution of the body, abides contemplating the factors of both birth and dissolution in the body. In him, there is the awareness that "there is a body", leading to mere knowledge and full presence of mind. He abides free, craving nothing in the world".

So, the starting point is the immediate sensory data, *pratyakṣa*, perception, drawn from the contact of the five senses with the external object. It is essential to note that various Eastern traditions, including Buddhism, have debated extensively

on the reality of the external world, sometimes with fundamentally opposing positions.

The fact is *dukkha*, suffering: that caused by the violent and irreparable vision of physical decay; that arising from reflection on the universal destiny of finitude; that of the restless female dog, lurking behind the rocks, waiting for the human couple to move away so she can pounce on her meal again; that of the poet's own thirst-desire, whose attachment to the beloved and her graceful form leads to a kind of eternalization – "J'ai gardé la forme et l'essence divine de mes amours décomposés" (I have preserved the form and divine essence of all my decomposed loves) – and therefore to ideal denial of transience.

Yet, the Buddha might tell the poet that something, in his verses, has indeed been truly seen; now it is a matter of decontextualizing that something, expanding its scope. "Tout cela descendait, montait comme une vague" (All of this descended and rose like a wave): the incessant flow of change, the surges of the ocean of rebirths, the profound truth of impermanence. "Les formes s'effaçaient et n'étaient plus qu'un rêve" (Forms vanished and were nothing more than a dream), moment after moment after moment after moment.

Before his death, lying on his right side in the lion's posture, the Buddha once again imparted to his monks a lesson in Death Education: "Cease weeping and lamenting! Have I not already said that everything dear and pleasant is destined to change and decay? How could it be otherwise? Now I tell you: all conditioned phenomena are subject to decay. Continue to diligently practice". These were his last words (*Mahāparinibbānasutta*).

Forms disappear; everything arises and ceases instantly, incessantly, some interpreters of the Master's discourses will say, carefully avoiding ontological bird catchers, their sticky eternalism on one side and nihilism on the other.

> *astīti śāśvatagrāho nāstīty ucchedadarśanam*
> *tasmād astitvanāstitve nāśrīyeta vicakṣaṇaḥ*

Nāgārjuna, the great "demolisher" asserts "To say "it is", is eternalist vision, to say "it is not" is nihilistic vision. Therefore, one who sees clearly will not cling to either the idea of being or the idea of non-being", (MK 15.10). This shattering of autonomous, independent substance (being-in-itself, inherent identity), pulverized into "emptiness" under the blows of dialectics, places thought on a nondiscursive, apophatic threshold, before which unfolds the ineffable dimension of *nirvāṇa*, but only after presenting the acquisition of awareness of the true nature of things: devoid of production, devoid of cessation, nondual, interdependent, and interconnected (an interconnection now happily reintroduced by social constructionism).

In the crisis of grief, the disciples of the Buddha weep and mourn, once again obscured by the contaminating affliction of *upādāna*, attachment, and for this reason, they are summoned back to contemplative order: right effort, right

mindfulness, right concentration, that is, calmness, mindful attention, deep insight, and compassion—a spiritual journey (significantly enriched by the contributions of Tibetan traditions) that unfolds, now more than ever, its thanatological potentials, meeting the challenge, as indicated by Federico Divino, of presenting itself in the West as an "antidote to the prevailing anxiety stemming from the enigmatic nature of death".

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