

THINKING THE CHARNEL GROUND (THE  
CHARNEL GROUND THINKING): AUTO-  
COMMENTARY AND DEATH IN ESOTERIC  
BUDDHISM

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to return to the quiescence of the inorganic world  
– Sigmund Freud<sup>1</sup>

This essay has already begun to comment on itself. To repeat itself, folding into itself like a strand of DNA. Is this auto-commentary a mode of life, or a mode of death? Is it not rather an uncanny mode of undeath?

“We’re angels of life / We’re angels of death.” Hawkwind sing psychedelic songs of sorrow and insight. But who or what is doing the singing? Esoteric traditions of mysticism, the kind that gives rise to proclamations like the lyrics of Hawkwind, are forms of speculative realism. Like speculative philosophy, mysticism wagers that humans can think what lies outside what Quentin Meillassoux calls the correlationist circle, or what mysticism calls ego.<sup>2</sup> What else can you say about one of the most repeatable experiments on Earth?<sup>3</sup> Take almost any human nervous system, subject it to

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<sup>1</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, tr. James Strachey, intro. and notes Gregory Zilboorg (New York: Norton, 1961), 56.

<sup>2</sup> Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency* (Continuum, 2009), 5.

<sup>3</sup> A point made clear in the Shamatha Project, for instance. See Clifford Saron, et al., “Intensive Meditation Training Improves Perceptual Discrimination and Sustained Attention,” *Psychological Science* 21.6 (2010): 829–839. See Donald Lopez, *Buddhism and Science: A Guide for the Perplexed* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008). James Austin, *Zen and the Brain: Towards an Understanding of Meditation and Consciousness* (Cambridge,

various processes—silence, contemplative practices of the mind and body such as yoga and meditation, devotional practices such as kirtan and prayer—and the humans start to say the same thing. New Age philosophy is built on the supposed truisms that Sufi and Tibetan yogi speak alike, what Aldous Huxley called the perennial philosophy.<sup>4</sup> But why throw out the speculative baby with the New Age bathwater? Is it possible that contemplative humans are reporting something true about experience? And that beyond this, that this truth speaks a truth about biological—or even physical—existence as such?

To put it in terms of this essay's very form: is it possible for skirt the perilous edge of New Age syncretism in the name of a darker, stranger form of speculation that accepts the discoveries of science—that wagers, indeed, that mysticism is a form of science? For mysticism is the science of quiescence: the pursuit of the philosopher's stone is the pursuit of how to become a stone. As such, mysticism is threatening to established religious institutions that demand respect for an all too human hierarchy. The first few centuries of Christianity were spent in an all out assault against "Gnosticism" that resulted in Jesus, who argued that we are all sons of God, being kicked upstairs into an exclusive club of one.<sup>5</sup> Recent philosophical attacks on contemplative spirituality, for instance by Slavoj Žižek, only perpetuate the all too human pursuits of the early Church Fathers. Yet they are right to fear contemplation. Contemplation places us outside the human, outside of life, in a universe of death.<sup>6</sup>

What does this have to do with the practice of commentary? The notion of commentary comes into play in very significant ways in estoteric Buddhist mysticism. Dzogchen tantric liturgies are renowned for *auto-commentary*: including the gloss within the text itself, rather than in the margin. For instance, Chögyam Trungpa's *Sadhana of Mahamudra* was written in 1968 in an attempt to "quell

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MA: MIT Press, 1999). See also Sam Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (New York: Norton, 2004), 204–221.

<sup>4</sup> Aldous Huxley, *The Perennial Philosophy* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1947).

<sup>5</sup> Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Random House, 1989) 119–141.

<sup>6</sup> The most rigorous exploration of this to date has been Ray Brassier, *Nihil Unbound* (New York: Palgrave, 2007), 234–238.

the mighty warring of the three lords of materialism.”<sup>7</sup> In this sadhana (a sadhana is a Tantric liturgy, involving a feast), the practitioner reads out to herself exactly the experiential states at which the liturgy aims:

In the state of nonmeditation all phenomena subside in that great graveyard in which lie buried the complexities of samsara and nirvana. This is the universal ground of everything; it is the basis of freedom and also the basis of confusion. Within it, the vajra anger, the flame of death, burns fiercely and consumes the fabric of dualistic thoughts. The black river of death, the vajra passion, turbulent with massive waves, destroys the raft of conceptualization to the roaring sound of the immeasurable void. The great poisonous wind of the vajra ignorance blows with all-pervading energy like an autumn storm and sweeps away all thoughts of possessiveness and self like a pile of dust.<sup>8</sup>

Trungpa’s approach seems to be highly congruent with the view of Dzogchen, considered to be the highest of the six yantras or “vehicles” of esoteric Buddhism (Kriya, Upa, Yoga, Maha, Anu and Ati). The view is that the nature or essence of mind is already completely enlightened, requiring no further effort to realize anything, but simply an attunement to it.

Thus the mind can experience this basic profound enlightenment, and think and discourse at the very same time. There is no gap between immediate experience and its mediation. Auto-commentary becomes fully possible. Since conceptual thoughts are essentially expressions of the completely enlightened nature of mind, there is no problem in thinking per se, only in fixation on thinking and its products. Thus, it seems to follow from this that unlike other Buddhist liturgies, the Dzogchen tantras describe what they are doing while they are doing it, without dissonance.

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<sup>7</sup> Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, *The Sadhana of Mahamudra which Quells the Mighty Warring of the Three Lords of Materialism and Brings Realization of the Ocean of Siddhas of the Practice Lineage* (Halifax, Nova Scotia: Nalanda Translation Committee, 1980).

<sup>8</sup> Trungpa, *Sadhana of Mahamudra*, 8.

It seems radical to think that a marginal gloss could embody the sacred as much as the central text. The very idea undoes the difference between center and edge that underwrites the difference between commentary and main text. This is in keeping with the Dzogchen idea that reality as such is already a perfect, spontaneously arranged mandala that lacks a center or an edge. As the *Sadhana of Mahamudra* puts it: “This is the mandala which is never arranged but is always complete.”<sup>9</sup> The term *commentary* stems from the Latin roots *cum* and *mens*, implying that in commentary one mixes one’s mind with the text. A commentary is a collection of memoranda, things to be held in mind; or a memoir, aids to personal recollection.<sup>10</sup> But perhaps there is a deeper reason why commentary seems appropriate for thinking the mystical text. For esoteric Buddhism, the mind of the teacher who transmitted the teachings is an expression of the nature of mind totally intimate with the practitioner. Thus commentary implies mixing one’s mind with the guru’s mind, the essence of the teachings, refuting by example Plato’s distinction between written and oral memory.<sup>11</sup> This bond between textuality and immediacy was considered dangerous and to be kept secret from those who had not done sufficient preparation.

Why? Because of a disturbing *intimacy*, I shall argue, that exists beyond being and not-being. Martin Hägglund argues no sentient being whatsoever can logically desire fullness. This would mean to desire to have one’s desire erased, and to have things that are only constituted in and as lack made suddenly present, which would amount to their vanishing from the face of things.<sup>12</sup> Such an argument has often been leveled by Western philosophy against Buddhism. Millions of humans do desire Nirvana, which at least on Hägglund’s view is “absolute death.”<sup>13</sup> Yet these humans do not experience their desire as meaningless, although this “absolute death” is equivalent to the desire for fullness, on Hägglund’s view.

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<sup>9</sup> Trungpa, *Sadhana of Mahamudra*, 7.

<sup>10</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, “commentary,” n.1.

<sup>11</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*, tr. Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff, in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John Cooper (Ithaca: Hackett, 1997) 506–556 (541–553).

<sup>12</sup> Martin Hägglund, *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 11, 30, 117–118, 192–195, 198–204, 208.

<sup>13</sup> Hägglund, *Radical Atheism*, 8, 29, 32, 162, 229.

How might esoteric practice take on Hägglund? Perhaps the most effective way would be from the inside rather than from the outside. Let us grant that the world is (almost) as he says. How might the esoteric desire for fullness might work alongside rather than against a deconstructive view of identity, that is along with the “desire for survival” that Hägglund argues is intrinsic to being an impermanent, mortal being? My opening suggestion would be to look to Bataille. Bataille argues that religion is not the search for something bigger than oneself, like a giant crowd in which to be lost (a fascistic notion), but the search for a lost intimacy.<sup>14</sup> With this model, we have several items on Hägglund’s checklist, without having to endorse radical atheism. We have a nontotalizable reality, openness to the new and to the stranger, and a nonrealizable infinity of interrelation. What we have is *non-theism* rather than theism or atheism, if by “theism” we mean belief in some transcendent beyond, and if by “atheism” we mean simple denial of anything beyond the empirical.

To see the world only in terms of a vanishing trace structure is to see something true, but it is also to delimit the world in so doing. This delimited world cannot explain some of the basic facts of the larger world. The fact that a liturgy and its commentary can be exactly the same thing implies that the makers of the liturgy believe that one can surprise oneself. In other words, one is able to think rationally while undergoing “mystical” experiences, and vice versa, without the two canceling one another out. There is no spell to be broken. Thus writing—and things that bear the stigma of writing, such as commentary—is no longer a poison. The presence of the occult bond between writing and the real is reflected in Guru Yoga, a certain practice in which one prepares oneself to receive the sacred teachings by reciting a certain mantra 1.2 million times. In the preparatory practice of prostrations, one visualizes a wish-fulfilling tree, on the back branch of which is a vast collection of sacred texts. The texts are speaking themselves, in millions of

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<sup>14</sup> Georges Bataille, *Theory of Religion*, tr. Robert Hurley (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1992), 57. For the “something bigger” motif, see William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (London: Penguin, 1985), 525—almost the last thing James says about religion in his concluding chapter. David Wood has stated a contrasting view: David Wood and J. Aaron Simmons, “Moments of Intense Presence: A Conversation with David Wood,” *Journal For Cultural and Religious Theory* 10.1 (Winter 2009): 81–101.

syllables that mutter on the breeze. This disturbing sound is supposed to fill the space of the visualization, which may be thought as a channeling or attunement to a real entity that exists beyond the conceptual mind.

This essay will thus proceed by trying to think the unthinkable, the unthinkable that Dzogchen nevertheless suggests is well within the capacity of sentient beings to think and to experience, even to talk about, even while it is occurring, without breaking anything. The essay begins by arguing that for esoteric Buddhism, realization is not a mental state in the sense of a thought-about... held by a mind. Rather, realization is just physical reality as such, outside the echo chamber of mentation. How does the esoteric practitioner get there? The notion of commentary comes into play. Through a path laid out by what Freud calls the death drive, I shall focus some of this analysis on sentences that comment on themselves, yet negate themselves in the process. Self-replicating molecules are *physical auto-commentaries* that are attempting to solve their inner disequilibrium: to die.

#### ENLIGHTENMENT AS / IN PHYSICAL REALITY

Sigmund Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* speculates about what happens to a single-celled lifeform. The cell must take in nutrients to survive, so its boundary must be permeable (eros, the "life" drive). It must then absorb and digest what it takes in from the outside. It strives towards equilibrium, metabolizing what it absorbs (the death drive).<sup>15</sup> It develops a membrane that is quasi-inorganic, nonliving, to resist the intensity of the outside: a shield of death.<sup>16</sup> Famously—and beautifully in James Strachey's translation—Freud argues that the purpose of life is death, to return to an inorganic state, or as Strachey's translation puts it, "the quiescence of the inorganic world."<sup>17</sup> This search for quiescence Freud names the Nirvana principle, borrowing the term from another psychoanalyst.<sup>18</sup> Nirvana: extinction. What if this were not just a metaphor?

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<sup>15</sup> Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 20–22.

<sup>16</sup> Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 21. See Brassier, *Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction* (New York: Palgrave, 2010), 237–238.

<sup>17</sup> Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 56.

<sup>18</sup> Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 50. The psychoanalyst in question is Barbara Low.

What if, in other words—assuming again that mysticism is a form of speculative realism—nirvana as such, “extinction” (to use a provocative term of Ray Brassier’s that is also the literal translation of nirvana) really were the goal of biological life?<sup>19</sup> When Buddhism talks about transcending desire and clinging, Western thinking often takes this to mean a bad suicidal drive. What if, however, this conclusion was actually accurate, even more accurate than nineteenth-century philosophers (Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and a host of Buddhaphobes) reckoned?

We can proceed even further. What if nirvana really was a state of “quiescence,” with all the participle-like, gerundive quality of that word: a form of awareness, an “-ence” as it were that happens to someone, or to something? In that case, awareness would not be a property of subjects, whether considered as emergent effects of biological processes or taken as supervenient facts that transcend or subtend the physical realm. Biology is already thinking cognition outside the supposed exigencies of having nerves and a brain.<sup>20</sup> As a matter of fact, awareness would not even be a function of living systems, since the ultimate conclusion here is that you can be “dead”—switched off, post-orgasm, floating in satisfaction—and still sentient. But what if you could be actually dead and still sentient? Philosophy has tended to balk at such questions.<sup>21</sup>

What if, just to push it even further, sentience was not some kind of soul or essence that survives death, but is in fact a default mode of existing at all, whether you are organic or not? Panpsychism thinks this thought.<sup>22</sup> But what if—concluding this long series of speculations—panpsychism had it upside down? So that sentience is not what every entity has in some sense, but that

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<sup>19</sup> Ray Brassier, *Nihil Unbound*, “Extinction” is the final word of that text (239).

<sup>20</sup> Consider the study of quorum sensing in bacteria: <http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/quorum/>

<sup>21</sup> Reza Negarestani powerfully examines this paucity in “Drafting the Inhuman: Conjectures on Capitalism and Organic Necrocracy,” in Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek and Graham Harman, eds., *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism* (Melbourne: re.press, 2011), 182–201 (194–195 n.20).

<sup>22</sup> For a range of essays on panpsychism see David Skrbina, ed., *Mind that Abides: Panpsychism in the New Millennium* (Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2009).

*what sentience is resembles a mute object* like a pencil, resting silently (perhaps “quiescently”) on this table? “The third of the Fates alone, the silent Goddess of Death.”<sup>23</sup> So that mystical practices of contemplation were about stripping away our illusions about the nature of sentience until we arrive at an object-like entity, an entity that precisely is not “us” but is far more intimately “there” than us? Our self as a decapitated corpse, to speak somewhat poetically? “Nearer than breathing, closer than hands and feet.”<sup>24</sup>

This actual body then is precisely what becomes enlightened. Or rather, again using mystical language: the body is already enlightened. It’s simply that we are confused about this. So our job is to strip away our confusion. At a deep enough level, this means stripping away us—then who is doing the stripping? Something is executing its own program.

Freud remarks that “the phenomena of heredity and the facts of embryology” demonstrate the reality of the compulsion to repeat, which he interprets as evidence of the death drive.<sup>25</sup> He gives the examples of how the ontogeny of the embryo recapitulates the phylogeny of lifeforms. Freud notes that this recapitulation is inefficient—why not just proceed directly to the required shape? We shall return to this point when we consider sex. But repetition in lifeforms lies far deeper than embryonic stages of living organisms. RNA and DNA molecules are in a state of irreducible disequilibrium. They are like Henkin sentences: “There is a version of me in system *X*.” Viruses are capsules of RNA (mostly) that tell DNA to find a copy of itself in its system. Or viruses resemble Cretan liar paradoxes: “I am a Cretan; I am lying.” That’s how they kill you—they turn you into an infinitely looped virus factory. Just like a computer virus in fact. If you think a virus is alive, you must also think a computer virus is alive, in every meaningful sense of “alive.” A virus is already a form of non-life, questioning in its very existence the rigid boundary between organic and inorganic worlds.<sup>26</sup> This is because DNA is also somewhere in this non-thin, non-rigid boundary, this edge that is

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<sup>23</sup> Sigmund Freud, “The Theme of the Three Caskets,” in Peter Gay, ed., *The Freud Reader* (New York: Norton, 1989), 514–522 (522).

<sup>24</sup> George Morrison, “The Reawakening of Mysticism,” *The Weaving of Glory* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1994), 103–110 (106).

<sup>25</sup> Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 31.

<sup>26</sup> I use the term “non-life” to evoke the “non-philosophy” of François Laruelle.



no edge teeming with entities: plasmids, replicons, insertions, junk DNA, virions, viroids. All these entities exist because of self-replicators, which may have started with non-organic replicators such as a silicate crystal (how strange, a silicon based entity “before” life), to which RNA could attach itself.<sup>27</sup> In this sense, the death drive predates life itself. The silicate crystal accepts the RNA strand in order to “solve” the stain that is its existence, only to find itself ineluctably reproducing.

Why do replicators replicate? Isn’t it because of some fundamental disequilibrium that the molecule is somehow “trying” to shake off? Isn’t DNA also trying to “return to the quiescence of the inorganic world”? Isn’t the death drive, then, far far lower down than single-celled organisms, relative newcomers on the four and a half billion-year-old scene? Wouldn’t it be unsurprising then that if the death drive were installed at this fundamental level, all levels above it would manifest it in different ways, until we reach self-reflexive levels of consciousness and the meaning-saturated worlds humans and other life forms spin for themselves—civilization, in a word?

And isn’t this the ironic thing about civilization, according to Freud: that the more of it you have, the more death you have? Because the death drive can’t eradicate itself. It is the stain that is trying to get rid of itself, the anomaly that is trying to wipe itself out—through further anomalies. Quine sentences, of which the Cretan liar paradox is a potent example, try to swallow themselves:

IS NOT A COMPLETE SENTENCE  
IS NOT A COMPLETE SENTENCE.

But in the process of trying to swallow themselves, they make more of themselves. Notice the similarity of this sentence to an auto-commentary. The sentence is a commentary on its truth status.

In the process of trying to solve its inner disequilibrium, DNA and other replicators do the only thing they do—replicate. The trouble is, the more you pursue it, the more *life* you live. The death

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<sup>27</sup> This is Sol Spiegelman’s “RNA World,” a strange world that must have preexisted life, since DNA requires ribosomes, and ribosomes require DNA. In order to break the circle, Spiegelman posits RNA World: *The Ancestor’s Tale: A Pilgrimage to the Dawn of Life* (London: Phoenix, 2005), 582–594.

drive is precisely this momentum to cancel oneself out, to erase the stain of existence. Death is the essence of life:

The attributes of life were at some time evoked in inanimate matter by the action of a force of whose nature we can form no conception. It may perhaps have been a process similar in type to that which later caused the development of consciousness in a particular stratum of living matter. The tension which then arose in what had hitherto been an inanimate substance endeavoured to cancel itself out. In this way the first instinct came into being: the instinct to return to the inanimate state.<sup>28</sup>

DNA is involved in a noir plot in which the detective finds out that he is the killer. In attempting to solve the riddle of its existence, DNA redoubles existence.

Isn't this an elegant example of Buddhist samsara? By trying to solve your problem, you create another problem—because *you are* the problem. In this sense, anxiety, the bedrock emotion in Buddhism, existentialism and psychoanalysis is the default state of existing, not because of some special vitalist soul force, but because of the conundrum “experienced” by DNA itself, and molecules like it.<sup>29</sup> Anxiety courses through our being precisely because it is archaeological evidence of a deadlock that goes far, far, deeper than us, deeper even than life itself. In this the Buddhist Wheel of Life accords with Freud. Life is depicted as a never-ending wheel in which the snake (aggression) chases the pig (ignorance) chasing the chicken (passion), generating the six realms of existence: all this is enclosed in the jaws of Yama, the god of death. Sentient beings find themselves inside this vast entity, which elsewhere I call a *hyperobject*, as surely as they find themselves inside a twenty-sided capsule of protein (cold virus) or a capsule of skin (myself). Deleuze calls Freudian death a “transcendental principle.”<sup>30</sup> But I claim that

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<sup>28</sup> Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 32.

<sup>29</sup> Of course this argument is proposed via another route by Martin Heidegger in *Being and Time*, tr. Joan Stambaugh (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1996), 316 and *passim*.

<sup>30</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, tr. Paul Patton (New York: Continuum, 2007), 18.

it only appears as a “principle” because we exist on its interior and so we can’t alter it. It is better thought as a gigantic mouth.

DNA “wants” to cancel itself out. In this sense DNA radicalizes Freud’s sense of “organic,” by which he surely means “alive,” so that the “inorganic” is the world of what Wordsworth calls “rocks, and stones.”<sup>31</sup> But by “organic” we now mean “carbon-based self-replicator”—a far wider definition that goes beyond the onto-theological boundaries of “life” towards an undead zone of non-life, a charnel ground (favored spot of tantric yogis) where zombies roam. Enlightenment, then, is zombification: making peace with the inner zombie. Far from transcending the world of material objects, meditation burrows down further into them, releasing subjective confusions such as the idea of a separate ego. One really does become like a stone, as is said in the Zen meditation manuals.<sup>32</sup> Surely this is why Vajrayana (esoteric, “diamond” or “thunderbolt” vehicle) Buddhism selects for people with intense emotional strife and high intelligence: because intense life is directly proportional to intense death. Placid, calm people tend not to get it at all. It’s the people on the edge of a nervous breakdown who are most likely to awaken in one lifetime, or go mad in the attempt.

#### THE HORROR OF BLISS

Hence perhaps the role of ouroboric postures in yoga and meditation: turning yourself into a pretzel provides archaeological evidence of DNA disequilibrium, obvious in its double-helix form and its viral, infinite loopiness: Henkin sentences and Cretan liar paradoxes that viral code embodies are self-swallowing propositions. (It’s tempting, in syncretistic fashion, to speculate on the significance of serpentine forms in esoteric spirituality, from the serpent guarding the tree in Genesis to the kundalini or serpent energy in a subtle channel parallel with the spine.) The evidence present in the images of self-swallowing, navel gazing contemplatives that so scared nineteenth-century philosophers is there precisely because of the physical disequilibrium that shatters

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<sup>31</sup> William Wordsworth, “A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal,” in *The Major Works: Including the Prelude*, ed. Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

<sup>32</sup> Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism* (New York: Grove Press, 1964), 47.

the coherence of the levels above it.<sup>33</sup> To this extent, rather than being dismissed as narcissistic (only wounded narcissism dismisses itself thus), postures of meditation should be celebrated not because they are New Age symbols of balance and intertwining harmony—but because they aren't. And because enlightenment is indeed physical—it's a function of a substance that "poses" itself, that has a posture. As any experienced meditator will tell you, the physical posture is about eighty percent of the practice.

Hence also perhaps the role of stillness and silence in esoteric rituals: becoming physically still, ceasing speech, ceasing the motion of the prana through the body, bringing these flows into the central channel. These practices are supported by philosophical negations, such as those found in the apophatic traditions of Judaism and Christianity, and the Mahayana philosophy of emptiness (Nagarjuna, Chandrakirti): negation is the work of death, peeling away and rejecting, spitting out.<sup>34</sup> This philosophical work, from the esoteric point of view, leads to an ability to tolerate the already-there presence of intimate, physical reality (luminosity, in Buddhist terminology): philosophy as allergy medicine. What is being stripped away and expelled is confusion—but in a way that is congruent with intellectual processing speeds. Negation provides a toy version of the real thing to amuse the frog of intellect while it sits in the increasingly hot water of the real. But eventually the toy is put aside and the more direct work of silencing oneself begins. The real is unspeakable, like the taste of sugar to a mute person (the traditional analogy in the Dzogchen tradition of Tibetan Buddhism).

Freud argues that the death drive is silent: "[it is] a transcendental principle, whereas the pleasure principle is only psychological ... [the death drive] not given in experience" (Deleuze).<sup>35</sup> In early Christian esotericism (Gnosticism), God is named "the Silence."<sup>36</sup> To attend to this silence is to shut down slightly, to turn inward slightly. The manuals say that bliss is

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<sup>33</sup> See Timothy Morton, "Hegel on Buddhism," in Mark Lussier, ed., "Romanticism and Buddhism," *Romantic Praxis* (<http://www.rc.umd.edu/praxis/buddhism/morton/morton.html>).

<sup>34</sup> Sigmund Freud, "Negation," *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and tr. James Strachey, 24 vols. (London: Hogarth Press, 1953), 9.233–240.

<sup>35</sup> Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 18.

<sup>36</sup> Pagels, *Gnostic Gospels*, xvii, 50, 53–54, 59.

there.<sup>37</sup> Bliss is the little death, the orgasm that plays aikido with the life drive by disarming it with its own energy, and lays it out flat to rest in space. Bliss is evidence that the body is relieved that the ego has departed. Strictly speaking, then, it's the body that becomes enlightened. The manuals say that different parts of your body can have an orgasm, that our fixation on genital orgasm inhibits the flow of bliss. Why? Perhaps because it perpetuates a Cartesian illusion—here I am, “having” an orgasm. Bliss, when it flows throughout the body, erases the ego's (mis)identification with physical reality through an aikido-like extension of pleasure beyond its normal bounds: death erasing pleasure through its own force, taking us beyond the pleasure principle.

This explains why bliss is often felt as a disturbing, creeping sensation more akin to horror than something warm and fuzzy, and why mental hospitals are full of people who have spontaneous physical sensations of bliss outside their genitals.<sup>38</sup> Bliss is automatic: what is scary is that mysticism works—it summons bliss, a devouring, Cthulhu-like entity existing in some unspeakable higher-dimensional phase space.<sup>39</sup> (Literally: the sensation is surely a derivative of some kind of wave-like function of nervous energy.) “Hell was what he wanted: Hell was what he got.”<sup>40</sup> These experiences, happening in people without religious training of any kind, are perfectly understandable if the speculative, mystical hypothesis that enlightenment happens in the body is correct. When mystics (and New Agers) talk about feeling insights “at a cellular level”—well, why not? Perhaps this is indeed the level at which such insights occur. And if it occurs there, why not also in nonsentient physical objects like toothbrushes and quasars?

Heterosexual reproduction is very expensive way of passing on DNA from a strictly utilitarian point of view. It's always better to be a clone. Perhaps this is precisely the point. Inherently inefficient heterosexual sex is an attempt by DNA to arrest its mad rush to replicate. Bliss would then be an experiential signal that

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<sup>37</sup> So many traditions, so little time, so just a few will do: The Six Yogas of Naropa, Dzogchen, St. Theresa, St. John of the Cross, Rumi.

<sup>38</sup> Stanislav Grof, *Spiritual Emergency: When Personal Transformation Becomes a Crisis* (Los Angeles: Tarcher, 1989).

<sup>39</sup> Just as Cthulhu “sleeps” in a high-dimensional Gaussian (non-Euclidean) space far out in the Universe, but can be summoned with the right incantation.

<sup>40</sup> Tony Randell, dir., *Hellbound: Hellraiser 2* (New World Pictures, 1988).

some temporary equilibrium had been attained at some level of physical being. Heterosexual reproduction then is the pursuit of death, by death. (Poetry aside, perhaps this also explains why heterosexuality floats on top of a giant ocean of homosexuality and cloning.)<sup>41</sup> Bliss is the birthright of a lifeform, but also its deathright. A common refrain in esoteric religion is that bliss burns illusion. What remains after sex according to the tantric traditions, and basic common sense? Awareness. Is awareness then outside life, beyond life, in objects of all kinds? In substance as such? I'm not pushing panpsychism here, I'm actually arguing for the opposite: not that a stone has awareness, but that awareness is like a stone, just like they say in the Zen manuals.<sup>42</sup>

It's no accident that to reach this uncanny, even horrifying bliss one must pass through sunlit canyons of despair, strange vast chambers of slow motion sadness, abysses oozing with melancholic sweetness and darkness—the dark night of the soul, that is the soul, or what Nicola Masciandaro calls the sorrow of being.<sup>43</sup> The dark night of the soul is disturbing because melancholia, the default mode of being an ego, is holding on for dear life to nothing. Because the soul's essence is this very quiescence of the inorganic world, it must remember through this darkness that everything else is an illusion, a delusion that the soul matters, that reality is about it, for it—even the nothingness of melancholy self-reference is a delusion. How to let go? You have to tunnel further in—that's what every mystical text on the planet says.

Why? If we speculate here, it's because melancholia is a distorted photocopy of the truth of the charnel ground of existence. Depression is the rush of death-in-life decelerated by some psychic object that holds the mind in its jaws until we learn to hear its truth. Depression is frozen wisdom. Inside the ice is molten water. What replaces the delusion of melancholy is what is already the case—the simple coexistence of entities, “objects” to use Graham Harman's terminology. So spiritual depression doesn't exactly swing “back” to two-dimensional happiness, which has become an impossible

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<sup>41</sup> Joan Roughgarden, *Evolution's Rainbow: Diversity, Gender, and Sexuality in Nature and People* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), Dawkins, *Ancestor's Tale*, 626.

<sup>42</sup> Shunryu Suzuki, “Last Lecture of Sesshin,” February 28, 1970 (<http://www.shunryusuzuki.com/suzuki/index.cgi/700228Va180.html>)

<sup>43</sup> Nicola Masciandaro, “The Sorrow of Being,” *Qui Parle* 19.1 (Fall–Winter, 2010), 9–35.

escape route. Depression simply dissipates, like Arctic frost in the bright cold air. It enfolds itself back into the mute coexistence of things. Melancholy is supposed to be the pathological twin of mourning.<sup>44</sup> But the small print of mourning is that to pass through it we must dwell with melancholia. Melancholy is a lump in our throat, a rock in our stomach, a knot in our subtle body channels, an object-like entity that seems to stick in our being. It reminds us of the object world we strive to leave behind in our quest to compute the impossible. As such, the sorrow of being goes “deep down things” (to use Gerard Manley Hopkins’s phrase).<sup>45</sup>

#### MYSTICISM AS SPECULATIVE REALISM

Again, mysticism is a form of speculative realism: the attempt to talk outside the ego, based on the fact that ego is only an illusion. In fact, from this point of view, what’s perplexing is that confusion happens at all. What’s perplexing is “this life,” not what lies “beyond” life. It’s perfectly “natural” that enlightenment happens all the time, because we don’t have an ego, but we do have physical bodies. It’s not some gift from above, but the spontaneity of what is below. Which is why esoteric traditions jealously guard their secrets: they can be abused because enlightenment is not difficult at all—it is in fact the default mode of existing, period. Armed with this information, which also makes you immune to normative standards of law and pathology, you could become a demonic ego, a being known as Rudra in Tantric Buddhism. Even Rudra is all right in the end, because enlightenment ultimately humiliates even this demonic state. The traditional story is that Buddha anally penetrates Rudra, shocking him into giving up. Vajrayana enjoins practitioners to visualize themselves as enlightened beings such as Green Tara or Manjushri—like emptiness philosophies, but working with bliss rather than intellect, this approach provides an allergy medicine against rejecting the object-like existence of mind essence.

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<sup>44</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Mourning and Melancholia*, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and tr. James Strachey, 24 vols. (London: Hogarth Press, 1953), 14.237–258.

<sup>45</sup> Gerard Manley Hopkins, “The World is Charged with the Grandeur of God,” *The Major Works*, ed. Catherine Phillips (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

These deities are often depicted trampling on the corpse of the Rudra of ego. Visualization (and mantra) has been described as an “enlightenment virus”—a sort of Henkin sentence that dismantles the ego through bliss.<sup>46</sup> Repetition is a feature of the death drive. Mantras are viral clones of sacred words, uttered millions of times. Preliminary practices for the Vajrayana include 1.2 million repetitions of the Guru Yoga mantra (*Om Ah Hung Vajra Guru Padma Siddhi Hung*), and 100 000 repetitions of the hundred-syllable Vajrasattva mantra, along with 100 000 prostrations. Meditation is a viral clone of attention. In basic shamatha you place your attention on an object (the breath, a statue, a visualization) over and over again, bringing your attention back when you get lost. In more advanced practices you remain undistracted in “nonmeditation,” repeating the experience of letting go over and over again.

From standpoint of the kusulu, the “simple meditator,” the entire universe is a charnel ground, a place teeming with dead objects, pieces of hair and fingers, some of them walking around with the brain still inside the skull (“alive”). The yogi is friendly with death, because death is more intimate than life, because there is “life after death”—as I argued a while back, what’s harder to explain is the life “before” death, this apparently different state that humans so rigidly demarcate from everything around it in time and space. The esoteric meditation manuals of Mahamudra instruct you to meditate like a corpse. Could this be because a corpse is already meditating, in every meaningful sense? A Dzogchen yogi is a *kusulu*—three Tibetan words meaning “eat,” “sleep” and “shit.” Far from a demeaning term, this is the highest designation. It describes someone who knows what they are about. Such a yogi or yogini (the female form) experiences a charnel ground as a space of intimacy, not a cold, repellent place of terror, but a warm, loving place—not because she is suffering from the delusion that the corpses are really alive, but because she isn’t. The ultimate funeral for such a yogini is sky burial, being chopped up to be eaten and shat out by vultures: the most ecological death imaginable, one that acknowledges the fact of coexistence that exists prior to thinking about it, and without the need for thinking about it.

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<sup>46</sup> Tsoknyi Rinpoche, retreat, Crestone Colorado August 2006 (and frequently at other times and in other places).



NOWNESS OF DEATH

One of the most potent symbols of the dharmakaya in Dzogchen—the dharmakaya being the essence of reality—is a skull. The “second Buddha” who brought Buddhism to Tibet, Padmasambhava, is often depicted holding a trident, upon which are impaled (in ascending order) a freshly decapitated human head, a rotting human head, and a skull. Dakinis—enlightened female beings—drink blood from skull cups. These cups (*kapala*) and the ritual drum (*damaru*) are best made from the skull of a baby. Tantric deities play drums made of human skin, the dead integument that “shield[s]” the living inside from the non-living outside.<sup>47</sup> This essay is arguing that these objects are not metaphorical. They are symbols in the Coleridgean sense: pieces of reality that have somehow made it into experience. Tantric Buddhism is a profound acknowledgment and acceptance of this reality. As one high Tibetan lama observes, “Spit into a cup. Now drink the spit. Why can’t you do it? It was just in your mouth. You see? We have a problem.”<sup>48</sup>

Why is it no accident that to reach the charnel ground you must pass through the valley of sorrow? Because the darkness is installed at the DNA level. DNA replication is a forgetting of the inorganic essence of DNA. Life cleaves to the delusion that life is why life lives. Yet DNA is also simply molecular physical form, “as it is,” *thathata* (suchness): “emptiness is no other than form” (the Prajnaparamita Sutra of Mahayana Buddhism) because form itself, substance in the most cornily Aristotelian sense, if you like, is Buddha, directly, without needing any kind of transformation. Why? Could it be that when Buddhism refers to Buddha nature as *tathagatagarba*—enlightened seed, enlightened essence—it really means that the seed-like quality is what is enlightened? At least one teacher calls it *enlightened genes*.<sup>49</sup> What if genes actually were enlightened? In other words, what if what we call “awareness” is simply what for Heidegger is the “as-structure” of the way an object manifests to another object?

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<sup>47</sup> Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 21.

<sup>48</sup> Tsoknyi Rinpoche, Empowerment Retreat, Crestone, Colorado, August 2009.

<sup>49</sup> Chögyam Trungpa: this is a literal translation of the Sanskrit term *tathagatagarba*.

In that case, a pencil resting on a table is doing exactly what my mind is doing when it rests on the pencil. Awareness according to this logic is an almost trivial, totally inescapable fact of existing at all. No wonder then that esoteric Buddhism calls it *ordinary mind*.<sup>50</sup> To this extent, esoteric means “secret” not because it’s arcane or even because as just argued it’s dangerous, but because it’s self-concealingly obvious. Like an expert shoplifter who steals items right in front of the camera—because no one would believe that the crime is taking place before their eyes—this fundamental fact of reality hides in plain view.<sup>51</sup> It’s difficult to see precisely because it’s easy. The Artificial Intelligence (AI) and anti-AI philosophers are uncannily similar insofar as they both want to posit awareness as some kind of special feature, a bonus prize for having an organized nervous system, or for being highly evolved (an absurdly anti-Darwinian view for supposed reductionists), or “complex” (just ask a slime mold who’s more complex, them or humans).<sup>52</sup> The panpsychicists are also in this camp since they posit consciousness as a supervenient fact, a special kind of reality beyond physical matter. In sharp contrast to AI, anti-AI and panpsychism, mysticism and speculative realism drastically *cheapen* the value of consciousness. In my view this makes it even more mysterious than before, and it opens up the universe as a plenum of unique, discrete entities, each apprehending things differently.

In this sense, life after death is the regular state of affairs. Tibetan Buddhism says that every phase of existence is a bardo, an in-between state. To that extent, at this moment, we are all in the position of Tim Robbins’s character in *Jacob’s Ladder*: we have no idea that we are already dead. Isn’t this the basic plot of a certain form of noir, in which the reflecting subject realizes that she is the substance on which she is reflecting?<sup>53</sup> What requires explanation is *life before death*. To speculate further, after death states, also highly repeatable and remarkably similar, are indeed

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<sup>50</sup> Chögyam Trungpa, *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism* (Boston: Shambhala, 1973), 67–68.

<sup>51</sup> This is a constant theme in psychoanalysis, for instance in Jacques Lacan’s analysis of Poe’s story “The Purloined Letter,” *Seminar on the Purloined Letter* (<http://www.lacan.com/purloined.htm>).

<sup>52</sup> Slime molds traverse three distinct states of being: amoeba, plasmodium, sporangium.

<sup>53</sup> The temptation to make this into a neat Hegelian symmetry is overwhelming, but mistaken.

“experiences” of entities that remain after the body has become a corpse. Thus near-death experiences, induced by accidents or suitably high doses of psychedelic drugs such as DMT, temporarily cancel out the illusions of life before death. But unlike some forms of nihilism, in which there is nothing outside the “manifest” reality that appears to human mentation, there is something—everything in fact, even mentation as such.<sup>54</sup> This is where I must part company with Ray Brassier. In his brilliant reading of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* Brassier argues: “the trace of aboriginal death [the need for an “inorganic” membrane that shields the organism from the outside, like a coat of dead skin] harbours an impossible demand for organic life: it is the trace of a trauma that demands to be integrated into the psychic economy of the organism, but which cannot because it expresses the originary traumatic scission between organic and inorganic. The organism cannot live the death that gives rise to the difference between life and death.” Thus “Extinction is real but not empirical.”<sup>55</sup> To which the yogi replies, “Au contraire, Mister. I’m living it right now. So are you if you did but examine yourself.” The yogi might even accuse the nihilist of chickening out at the last moment—by restricting experience to the “manifest,” the nihilist is still caught in the circle of correlationism, that is, the circle of ego. If all that exists are objects that “experience” in any case, without some mysterious supervenient subject, then the “outside” is happening right now. You are holding it in your hands. You are reading it.

Though it sounds paradoxical to put it this way, remember that apprehension is a supremely default mode of existence: what pencils do to table tops. Slime molds can navigate around a maze: how come consciousness is restricted to having a nervous system, let alone to being “highly organized” or “complex”?<sup>56</sup> An object-oriented approach (a branch of speculative realism that I’m using here) provides a no-nonsense account of near-death experiences that, while not materialist, strictly speaking, is not idealist either. On this view, so-called near-death experience is a default mode that is happening all the time, but it’s overwhelmed in lifeforms

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<sup>54</sup> For the counterargument about the “manifest image,” see Brassier, *Nihil Unbound*, chapter 1, especially 5–6, 25–26.

<sup>55</sup> Brassier, *Nihil Unbound*, 238.

<sup>56</sup> See Toshiyuki Nakagaki, “Smart behavior of true slime mold in a labyrinth,” *Research in Microbiology* 152 (2001), 767–770.

with nervous systems by other signals. At the very least, an interpretation along these lines has the beneficial quality of being frighteningly straightforward and weirdly far-out simultaneously, for exactly the same reasons.

Doesn't this also mean that any attempt to undermine the logic of the death drive (and its sometime incarnation in theistic concepts such as god), through appeals to survival, are ultimately flimsy and, worse, self-defeating?<sup>57</sup> Even more seriously, aren't these attempts squarely on the side of idealizing "life before death" and thus not really materialist, though they claim to be? On the logic of the appeal to this kind of survival, life becomes a sad game of trying to avoid the inevitable. Far from being appeals to an atheism deeper than any possible theism (because god himself must be subject to the logic of self-preservation), these are the stereotypical reaction formations of modern utilitarianism par excellence, which doesn't even understand Darwin. The appeal to survival expresses a wish to return to a pre-Freudian universe, a wish to un-learn, to un-think, that perversely enacts the death drive in its very form, while denying the death drive in its content. The appeal has the form of a Cretan liar paradox. In starker terms, *the appeal is the death drive*. "Living on" is the very form of death in its most confusing, most anti-mystical guise.<sup>58</sup>

For a strict Darwinist, survival means passing on your DNA. What exactly survives here? A pattern, a form encoded in DNA. Not you, not your species—that's the lesson of Darwin even before DNA's discovery: there are no species and they have no origin.<sup>59</sup> Nothing "lives on." Survival means only that you didn't die before you had kids. Moreover, this "survival" is strictly a function of DNA's relentless drive to cancel itself out—so the death fish on the back of my car eats the survival fish on the back of Martin Hägglund's car.<sup>60</sup> DNA only reproduces to "solve" the problem of its inner disequilibrium. "The aim of life is death," quite literally,

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<sup>57</sup> For instance in Hägglund, *Radical Atheism* (see above).

<sup>58</sup> Hägglund, *Radical Atheism*, 33, 129–130, 167, 202.

<sup>59</sup> Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 43–45, 60–68, 120.

<sup>60</sup> For a powerful opening statement in a similar counter-argument, see Adam Kotsko, "Something I find Questionable in Hägglund" (<http://www.itself.wordpress.com/2011/02/12/something-i-find-questionable-in-hagglund/>)

perhaps more literally than Freud himself meant when he penned this phrase.<sup>61</sup>

So when Buddhism teaches that the dharma is about how to die, it is speaking the honest truth.<sup>62</sup> To say that Buddhism can only ponder these issues because we care about living a day longer to ponder them is to assume that caring happens in a subject who emerges from, or is supervenient upon, some physical entity—an assumption that mysticism and speculative realism rule out, either because this subject is never constitutive of physical reality (the critique of correlationism), or because “caring” is a version of the Heideggerian as-structure common to pencils, quasars and hanging chad.<sup>63</sup> There is scant but vivid evidence that this is the case. There are moments in art, for instance, such as *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, which have uncanniness without violence: sadness and horror, somehow combined. It’s assumed that you can’t combine them, because horror is an experience of a physical limit, and you have to have digested your trauma somewhat to have sadness. But if the after-death state is actually the default state of objects in the Universe, Buddhism is right to say that sadness and horror can be combined—compassion and renunciation, two major affective states for Buddhists, superimpose the one on the other precisely as ways of transcending the illusion of a rigidly separated zone of life as opposed to death. You can be horrified and soft at the same time, because your ego is only a construct—you give up the idea of merely surviving. The “transcendental fact” is the hyperobject of death’s maw, the jaws of Yama. To think otherwise is to separate life from death rigidly, which is pure onto-theology. To claim that horror precludes sadness is to remain in dualism, tinged with a flavor of Burkean authoritarianism: the sublime becomes the terror to which you must submit.

Mysticism claims that there is indeed a life beyond death, and that we are living it right now. Esoteric Buddhism claims that the Buddhas—the actual Buddhas, not seeds, not ideas, not images—reside in your heart and in your brain, in your very flesh. When you die they manifest unclouded by the noise and confusion of

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<sup>61</sup> Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 32.

<sup>62</sup> Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche, *Seminary Transcripts*, 1999 (Halifax, Nova Scotia: Vajradhatu, 1999).

<sup>63</sup> Graham Harman, *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects* (Peru, IL: Open Court, 2002), 8–9, 22, 32, 42, 45–47, 50, 60–61, 68–81.

samsaric existence, the crazy struggle of life to unlive itself. Enlightenment is nothing more nor less than objective, physical existence and coexistence. There is nothing to struggle against, only the quiescence of the inorganic world, the silence that filled Pascal with dread.<sup>64</sup> This nothing is curiously similar to the nothing found in mystical Christianity a nothing that is not simply the absence of something.<sup>65</sup> In Tantric Buddhism, mind essence is described as vajra nature, that is, as an indestructible object, literally a “diamond.” The vajra nature is an indestructible object because it is made of nothing, “a nothing that is not negative.” But it is indeed an object, a “sparkling stone” as the Flemish Christian mystic John Ruusbroec puts it. A stone that knows, however impossible to imagine that is in conventional philosophical terms.

In live performances of the song “Angels of Death” Dave Brock turns the terms “life . . . death” and around and around, as if death keeps on undercutting life, even as life keeps finding itself singing about itself, like a mirror being turned around and around to reflect, then not reflect, then to reflect again. This is the afterlife.<sup>66</sup> We are undead: “angels of life . . . angels of death . . . Born to erase / All of your days.”

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<sup>64</sup> Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, tr. A. J. Krailsheime (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1995), 201.

<sup>65</sup> Eugene Thacker, “The Wayless Abyss: Mysticism and Mediation,” *Postmedieval* 3.1, paragraph 23 (<http://postmedievalcrowdreview.wordpress.com/papers/thacker/>).

<sup>66</sup> See Eugene Thacker’s very suggestive exploration of the limits of “life” in *After Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), in particular 91–95, a discussion of how Islamic mysticism generates a “dark” concept of life.