

## Between Christianity and Buddhism: Towards a Phenomenology of the Body–Mind

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This paper is situated in the broader context of an examination of the relationship between East and West from the particular perspective of our experience of the body. It is therefore based on two specific traditions, one belonging to the East – a particular strand of Tibetan Buddhism – the other to the West – the Orthodox tradition of the heart prayer – in order to try to show the similarities and differences in their approach to the body and attempt to compare them in the light of their respective ‘phenomenology’. In this sense phenomenology, as a western philosophical discipline, plays a pivotal role in this comparison and hopefully helps to bring new light to bear on this investigation. The early Eastern church evokes the concrete experience of the body as a *holy body* and sees it as an exemplary route to *deification* via the mystical practice of the ‘heart prayer’ (hesychasm). As regards Tibetan Buddhism, it advocates the gradual experience of the body as a *rainbow body*, defined as a path towards *illumination*, by means of ‘sitting meditation’ which brings liberation in *bardo*. In order to carry out this analysis, I shall refer to two recent books that are authorities in both these fields, *Corps de mort et de gloire, Petite introduction à une théopoétique du corps* by O. Clément<sup>1</sup> and *Rainbow Painting: A Collection of Miscellaneous Aspects of Development and Completion* by Tulku Urguyen Rinpoché.<sup>2</sup>

Given the emphasis on the experience of the body in each religious context, I am going to highlight points that focus on the concrete attitude of the person who is seeking this kind of incarnation, as well as the subtle methods they use to cultivate this attitude. At the same time, I shall note the different features that characterize the various existing phenomenologies of the body, together with those that result from these spiritual experiences of incarnation as listed in Table 1.

The four themes featured on the first line of Table 1 give an indication of the phenomenological method I use, starting from experiences of the lived body in an attitude of natural living embodiment and proceeding to develop phenomenological categorial features that may count as universal via the empirical characteristics of

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0392-1921 [200311]50:4;23–32;039713

TABLE 1 Process of eidetic variation

<i>Experience</i>	<i>Holy body</i>	<i>Rainbow body</i>	<i>Phenomenological features</i>
1 Lived body	Incarnation	Reincarnation	Flesh
2 Death	Passion-kenosis	Letting go- <i>shunyata</i>	Self-dying
3 Birth	Deification	<i>Bardo</i>	Self-birthing
4 Luminosity	Glory- <i>dokesis</i>	Illumination	Lucidity
<i>Attitude</i>	<i>Endogenous categories</i>	<i>Natural eidetic categories</i>	<i>Belonging to a specific tradition</i>

endogenous religious categories, which allow us to leave the natural given embodiment in order to produce a more complex eidetic meaning as a result of their universality situated in an intermediate position.

I will account now for each of the four horizontal processes. Each one refers to a stage of our spiritual experience of being present as a living embodied being while transcending our physical body. I begin with our natural starting-point, that is, our experience of being a lived body, and see how, going through both religious and spiritual experiences of Christian Incarnation and samsaric Reincarnation, we might attain a renewed experience of our body as flesh. Then I describe the correlative dynamics of death and birth, and how they are understood in each tradition – as *kenosis*/abandonment or as letting-go/*shunyata* on the one hand, as deification or as liberating *bardo* (*nirvâna*) on the other – and show that such notions as self-dying and self-birthing can throw a new phenomenological light on what Husserl rather awkwardly called ‘transcendental flesh’. Finally, I suggest the hypothesis that the Orthodox Holy Body and the Buddhist Rainbow Body should be seen as two empirical religious ideas giving clues to a better understanding of Husserl’s definition of transcendental flesh, to which I ended up giving what I think is the more appropriate name ‘lucid body’.

### **From the natural experience of the lived body to the transcendental experience of the flesh: the Incarnation of Christ/samsaric Reincarnation in Buddhism**

As Merleau-Ponty quite rightly pointed out, we experience our lived body as an immediate unity through which we spontaneously evolve in the world and gradually develop, as we grow up, multifarious intuitive skills and many habits that accumulate over time. However, the powerful intervention of reflection may interrupt the habitual, spontaneous course of our immanently embodied thoughts, emotions and activities. We then experience a change in our normal bodily functioning, which may lead, in some extreme cases, to the pathological feeling of being separated from our own body (which appears to us as an ‘objectified’ thing placed next to ‘us’), while our consciousness is floating above or beyond it. Such schizophrenic and hallucinatory extreme cases show very well how the bodily unity we experience quite spontaneously in our everyday life is not a given but needs to be learnt and

gradually acquired through patient work and a slow familiarization with our own foreign bodily self.

In contrast with the traditional assertion of a rigid substantial dualism – which appears to originate far more in Cartesianism than in any religion (even Christianity) – this gradual acquaintance with oneself as an integrated mind/body unit has been exemplarily defined as a long difficult process within two main religious traditions, through the Incarnation of Christ, and through the Buddhist *samsaric* Reincarnation.

The life of Christ presents us with a mysterious case study of a human being born of another human being, a woman who nevertheless remained a Virgin and was born of a Virgin. The story tells us that the Holy Spirit came to her and that she then found herself pregnant with a son, Jesus, whose father happened – incredible as it may seem – to be none other than God himself. So Christ's birth was the fruit of a non-sexual intercourse, and his Incarnation therefore resulted in a human life without sin. I shall not go into the details of such a mystery, which as such does not have to be explained. I would just like to show how the early Christian theologians attempted to give a conceptual meaning to this exceptional experience by elaborating the dogma of the two natures of Christ (see Tertullian's *De carne Christi*), both human and divine, immanent and transcendent, finite and infinite, body and mind. For every Christian, however inconceivable his experience might seem to a finite human being, Christ represents an ideal unity of body and mind: a perfect example of unified spiritual flesh, with whom everyone strives to identify and enter into a unifying process (see for example in this respect Athanasius's *De Incarnatione Christi*). However, the phenomenological question is: how do we achieve this ideal body-mind? Or: how can we experience it in a way that will enable us to attain this state too?

Returning to the Buddhist approach of Reincarnation in the realm of *samsara*, which is the way all sentient beings live their lives (but also Boddhisattva, who refused to be liberated himself before everyone was), provides a clue in order to make sense of this process of becoming one unified body-mind. Whereas Incarnation is a unique exemplary event, the life of the Buddha is a good illustration of a gradual (faster or slower) path towards this unification of the body with the mind. The historical Sâkhyamuni Buddha was a human being (known as the Siddharta Gautama Prince) born of a woman but able to walk and speak from birth. So we are also dealing with a kind of miraculous birth, but unlike Christ, divinity is not a given to him: he has to go through a whole path of awakening and receives teachings. Through the experience of his own apprenticeship, he provides us with a way to learn how to awaken ourselves and see in concrete terms how to bring body and mind together for ourselves: the repetition of Incarnation (Re-incarnation) through different lives thus attests to the necessity of a quite gradual but total gathering-together of oneself, which most often requires more than one life-time.

From these two exemplary (but specific) experiences of embodiment, we can draw the following conclusions, which bring in the first two main characteristics of the flesh as a unified bodily mind: first, the structure of the flesh is a non-dual one, which puts aside every kind of duality (separation, distortion, crisis) of the embodied self, but also refuses any kind of abstract unity; second, the dynamic of the flesh requires a gradual temporality of unification of the self through a concrete

apprenticeship and through teachings directly delivered by other, more advanced, people.

**Kenotic Passion and letting-go *shunyata*: from the natural experience of death to the transcendental experience of self-dying**

As Heidegger correctly stated, death is a non-experience. At the moment when we die, it is already too late to experience anything whatever. Experiencing the death of other people, however (close friends, relatives), all of a sudden makes us become aware of our own finitude. Such crucial events abruptly reveal to us the vanity of all relative values compared with the unique value of life, and very often act as revealers of a hitherto quite self-absorbed, blind, deluded way of living. After undergoing a kind of existential *epochè*, where no ground remains, we then become aware of the need to re-anchor our life, thus finding in a particular religious tradition a wonderful treasure of wisdom, that is, of how to truly live a self-aware and vigilant life.

Now in both Christian and Buddhist traditions we encounter remarkable accounts of this familiarity with death during life as the best way to free oneself from illusory goods or superfluous possessions.

Christ's crucial experience of *kenosis* during the Passion bears witness to how a state of self-abandonment is attained. *Kenosis* means 'emptiness' and corresponds to an attitude of radical passivity and poverty, in the sense of a complete absence of will and a receptive welcoming of every event (good or bad) that may happen to us. Christ's suffering, which he expresses in a radical way when he says: 'Father, why have you forsaken me?', is an idealized experience of how we can learn during our own life to take on this attitude of renunciation, which does not mean resignation (fatalism), but becoming aware of what does not depend on ourselves (as the Stoics quite rightly stated long ago). In Eckhart's sermon 'On detachment', we find another (derived) exemplary lived account of how to free oneself from useless values or goods. The mystic stresses the experience of the emptiness of the soul, which is then able to welcome the density of the Absolute. Thus, impoverishing oneself is the only way to be ready to discover the treasure of the divine within oneself. Learning how to detach oneself, however, does not mean becoming indifferent and living a kind of dull valueless life. On the contrary, through detachment we develop a genuine openness and a spiritual strength with regard to any event that may occur.

The *kenosis* way is an exemplary eidetic way in that (as with the Incarnation) Christ appears as an ideal model with whom we may identify (according to the Imitation attitude); the Buddhist way is thus its counterpart in the sense that it presents itself as an experienced empirical way: just as daily work with one's mind-body, learning non-attachment to one's ego as a source of neurotic rigidification of one's mind, is a gradual, unceasing apprenticeship that is open to everybody. The basic *shamatha/vipashyana* sitting meditation practice in Tibetan Buddhism shows quite well how to observe one's thoughts and emotions pass by while breathing, without attaching oneself to them. We progressively learn how to let them go and how to prevent them from becoming solid and opaque to us. Such a letting-go experience is the basis for the discovery of the general emptiness of reality (*shunyata*),

which is the opposite of any substantial approach leading to a rigid dogmatism of thoughts and principles. To experience *shunyata* is to experience the impermanent mobility and the high density of the infinite multifarious relations within our world, while avoiding focusing on them. The exemplary experience of this ontological mobility is the experience of dying, as opposed to the unique event of death as separation from one's own body and mind (as it is sometimes conceived in our common-sense understanding of death). In that respect, the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, which advocates liberation through listening, offers an astonishing account of how to cultivate the reflective experience of dying while still living. Depending on the state of self-awareness you have gradually acquired through the practice of meditation during your life, you will be able to observe (or not) your own process of dying more or less accurately, and during a longer or shorter span of time.

The vision of different colours during the process of death (blue, red, yellow, green, purple) symbolizes the type of wakefulness you were able to attain and anticipates the kind of life you are then going to live again (as a god, as a human being, as an animal, as a devil) or your imminent liberation from samsaric life. Tibetan Buddhist teachings thus seem to contradict the classic phenomenological statement according to which death as such is non-experience and our only access to death is what Heidegger called *das Sein zum Tode*, that is, the experience of death as an impossible possibility at every moment of our life. These teachings, which focus on the praxis of self-awakening, indicate, on the contrary, the concrete capacity (not just the possibility) for everyone to increase their self-awareness throughout their life in order to be able to confront death *before* death, 'self-anticipating' it, and therefore living it *while* dying. While developing a living presence mindful of ourselves at every moment, we may become able to live our death as an experienced event of our life.

From both these exemplary cases of detachment (*kenosis/shunyata*), let me draw the following provisional conclusions. First, the *kenosis* way of example and the *shunyata* way of experience, though opposed, as I mentioned, in the method of proceeding, coincide when it comes to the experience of the crucial event of what I will then call 'self-dying', the experience of living one's own death at the very moment when it occurs. Second, learning how to have this experience, though this proceeds differently in *kenosis* and in *shunyata* (in one case through an ideal imitative identification, of which early Christian martyrs – Ignatius of Antioch, for one – are the best examples; or, in the other, through a gradual familiarization with letting go control over what happens), is a necessary self-working *via negativa* in order to open the door on a positive welcome into the realm of the divine/the absolute.

### **Glorified deification and liberating *bardo* (*nirvâna*): from the natural experience of birth to the transcendental experience of self-birthing**

This realm has a name in each tradition, according to the process – the *via positiva* this time – involved here. Orthodox Christians speak of 'deification' (*theosis/theopoesis*), Tibetan Buddhists of 'liberation *qua* liberating *bardo*' (*nirvâna*).

But before we turn to these exemplary/experiential liminal processes, let me

describe the concrete dynamic that is at work on a basic phenomenological level. It is the strict positive correlate of the previous process that we expressed as self-dying. As is well-known, birth is (like death) a non-experience. In a sense we may have a very obscure and confused bodily memory of our own birth, and we know how some re-birthing techniques in psychotherapy are able to help distressed people regain a kind of access to the event of their birth while re-living it. All the same, our only actual experience of birth is not strictly speaking empirical but *based on* our empirical birth. It is the clear and distinct self-awareness of having been born that gradually develops as an acute conscious experience of what I called a 'transcendental birth'.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, we discover every day new aspects of our inner life, we understand better what is involved in our relationships with others, we face wonderful events that bring us an intense joy, or sad ones that compel us to reflect on ourselves. Through all these lived experiences we undergo a process of self-birthing, through which we may gradually and intensively regenerate ourselves.

Claiming, as the Orthodox do, that '... human beings will become God' does not mean at all that they will be personally deified. The process of *theosis* (deification) lies simply in the recognition that we truly inherit a basic supernatural dimension, which can also be called (as it is in St Peter's Second Letter) our 'participation in the divine nature' (as is clearly stated in V. Lossky's *Théologie mystique d'Orient*). Speaking of 'super-nature' or 'divine nature', however, is not the same as speaking of a separate nature that we would have to attain, or of another nature opposed to our human nature. Our nature as human beings is only one, and its specificity is to be quite inherently a super-nature in the sense that we are able to become aware at every moment of our deep and inner way of being. Thus transcendence is, so to speak, residing within ourselves as an original constitutive dimension of ourselves. In short, we learn every day a bit better – and thus are we born to ourselves every day – how to go beyond our own actual limits. Deification is nothing but this process of self-transcendence.

In that respect, Buddhists will be in perfect agreement with their claim that we always are already enlightened beings, insofar as the Buddha-nature was originally given to us at our birth (and also earlier in previous lives). We thus possess it as an immanent hidden treasure and often simply do not know we already have it. So we actually need to rediscover it, and in fact it may take our whole life to do so. Liberating *bardo qua* enlightenment, therefore, is both slow and sudden. On the one hand, we unveil every day hidden aspects of this Buddha-nature concealed within ourselves as we learn concretely how to de-solidify opaque emotions; on the other hand, this discovery of oneself as enlightened may also occur suddenly as a surprise, as a kind of lightning, and our entire self then turns out to be given to us as a whole, even if it is only in one of its aspects (on this topic see Tulku Urgyen's *Repeating the Words of the Buddha*).

Let me now briefly conclude this point. The deification way is the path of self-transcendence inherent in human beings as divine/super-nature; the liberating enlightening way is the path of unearthing within ourselves our own immanent self as Buddha nature itself. In each case we rediscover the jewel of our own nature, which most of the time is lost or forgotten.

I would like to show now how this nature is nothing other than what we may

experience daily as the absoluteness of our own lived body, as a unique point of departure and the ultimate goal of any spiritual life.

### **From the natural experience of luminosity to the transcendental experience of lucidity: Holy Body and Rainbow Body**

These are the religious and spiritual experiences of the body known as Holy Body in the Eastern Orthodox Church and Rainbow Body in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. I attempt to give a phenomenological account of these liminal but also everyday experiences of bodily self-awareness in order to show how spiritual teachings on embodiment can also contribute to illuminating our phenomenological understanding of embodiment, and at the same time help to renew the phenomenological description of the spiritual life.

To start with, I would like to account for the way phenomenology has been able to tackle this issue of a self-aware bodily experience. To my mind, whereas Merleau-Ponty mainly underlined the habitual and sedimented aspect of our lived body understood as an operative reservoir of unconscious skills, it is Sartre who best highlighted the translucent dimension of a self-aware lived body. First, he defines the *pour soi* as a non-thetic self-consciousness, in other words, a pre-reflective self-awareness, which is opposed to the *en soi* understood as the dimension of inert and resistant ontic reality. Whereas the former is characterized by self-alteration and subject to time and negation, the latter is non-temporal and unalterable; furthermore, whereas the latter is said to be opaque and confused, the former is endowed with a super-capacity for translucency (Sartre's term)<sup>4</sup> and distinctiveness. Sartre's ontological dualism thus creates a clear-cut opposition between a luminous self-aware *pour soi* and an obscure material *en soi*. The question is: what is the part played by bodily awareness here? On the one hand, the body is seen as belonging to the realm of facticity, that is, a passive unreliable dimension of myself, from which I have to free myself in order to reach the translucent awareness of the *pour soi*. In that respect, there seems to persist in Sartre a strong tendency towards a neo-Cartesian dualist approach of body and consciousness; on the other hand, however, Sartre develops, in *Being and Nothingness*, a formal conception of the body, mostly in line with Kant's formal transcendental deduction of the body at work in *Opus Posthumum*. The translucent bodily self-awareness Sartre proposes thus opens the way for a non-material transcendental description of the body.

I would suggest that we actually need to combine Merleau-Ponty's attention to the lived body as a concrete material core of skills and learnt abilities and Sartre's stress on a translucent bodily self-awareness if we want to capture the full scope of the experience of an absolute lived body as it is provided by the spiritual traditions I have already referred to. So as a final thrust I am going to sketch out how these traditions give us an account of the body that is useful in light of the phenomenological claim to find, first, an adequate level of investigation of the body and, second, a unified conceptual approach.

The Holy Body is not a bodily dimension that we will only be able to attain once resurrected (if we should be); neither is it the privilege of the Body of Christ, who

was born without sin and therefore without any opacity. The Holy Body is in fact a glorified body (*dokesis*, meaning deification, from *doxa*, which signifies, in the theological Greek of the time, glory and not opinion), therefore originally involving a sensory, visual, luminous dimension. Thus the Holy Body is a transfigured and clarified body, which means that anybody should be able to undergo such a transformation of their body in everyday life. In that respect, the early Eastern Christian monks paved the way for quite an experiential understanding of the glorification of the body. They developed a spiritual *praxis* called 'heart prayer' (on this see the well-known *Philocalia* handbook), by means of which they were able to cultivate *nepsis* (sobriety) and *hesychia* (calm and tranquillity) of mind by calming down the train of thought (*logismoi*) through breathing and at the same time reciting this prayer. The goal of the practice is to reach one's heart, to feel it and to let one's clear conscious mind become attuned to the heart (here see O. Clément's account in *Corps de mort et de gloire*). Through such a gradual, increasingly intense feeling of the heart, according to the hesychasts (which is what they are called) body and mind are able to become more and more concentrated and ultimately unified. The holy body is this unified mind-body heart-awareness, which requires two parallel and synchronized moves: on one hand, relying on your body in order to really feel the genuine emotional warmth of your organic heart; and on the other, clearing the mind of its thoughts and emotions in order to be able to welcome the clarity and luminosity of the 'spiritual heart', which of course is not organically located any longer but corresponds to a kind of holistic dynamics of the body.

As far as the Buddhist experience of the Rainbow Body is concerned, it shares with the hesychast approach, first, the visual sensory dimension of light and luminosity and, second, the concrete experiential *praxis* and cultivation of enlightening one's body through working with the mind. As a Tibetan teacher Tulku Urgyen rightly said, however, 'you cannot make enlightenment, because enlightenment is unconstructed. Realizing the awakened state is a matter of being diligent in allowing non-dual awareness to regain its natural stability' (see *Rainbow Painting* on this question). Enlightenment is therefore a step-by-step process through which our body is able to undergo 'rainbowing' (if I may so call it), going through the different symbolic colours that identify different embodied states of self-awareness. This seems particularly evident during what is called the '*bardo* of dying', which quite gradually goes into the *bardo* of re-birthing (or of being enlightened, if you happen to have been self-aware enough). *Bardo* is that particular span of time during which you are able to live consciously while dying, thus experiencing passing through different self-aware bodily states: *nirmanakaya*, *samboghakaya* and finally *dharmakaya*, which is said to be 'the fundamental luminosity of full attainment', and corresponds to the rainbow body as being free of any substantial attachment.

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Having moved back and forth from one (phenomenological) side to another (religious/spiritual) and vice versa throughout this paper, I would like to make a final attempt at characterizing in a more synthetic way the main features of this possible experience of the absoluteness of our lived body:

1. *the time component*: gradual training and progressive dynamics seem to be required in order to become familiar with one's own body and put aside its resistant, opaque part, or at least learn how to work with it if it turns out to be impossible (which is most often the case) to get rid of it.
2. *the attention component*: with the temporal basis established, the main requirement seems to be one of attention, through which we learn how to both focus on the main ego attachments (thoughts/negative emotions) and suspend their reality as alienating forces; this opens the way for the creation of more plastic bodily space for action.
3. *the emotional/heart component*: once the attention gesture becomes more established through training, a welcoming of emotional and heart feelings seems to come into play, which helps to enlarge and enrich our view and our self-transformation.
4. *the intersubjective component*: this becoming aware of oneself would not be possible if we were to walk the path alone. It appears throughout this paper (even if I did not focus on it specifically) that there is a strong requirement for another person (either idealized – Christ – or more concretely a teacher, with the Buddha in the middle) in order to 'grow' spiritually. In that respect, two different intersubjective structures are at work – 'imitation' within Christianity, 'compassion' within Buddhism – which need to be compared with Husserl's and Scheler's own accounts (empathy/sympathetic compassion). Furthermore, the interpersonal community obviously plays a structural part in the spiritual development of each individual, be it as a visible/invisible Church or as the *sangha* in the Buddhist context, principally because it brings to the fore the structural framework within which you are able to find your way. So it plays an essential supporting role, even if each person remains absolutely alone and solely responsible for their own way.

Interestingly enough, each of these structural features or components has its equivalent in Husserl's own phenomenological attempt (and also in some post-Husserl work):

1. the living present as a non-linear dynamics of temporalizing, enriched by Heidegger's account of dying;
2. the gesture of reduction as reflective conversion and *epoché*-suspension, complemented by Heidegger's more existential account of *Gelassenheit* (letting-go);
3. the notion that brings the affective component to the fore in welcome;
4. the empathetic intersubjective dynamics, and its counterpart in Scheler's account of sympathy.

It seems to me that these four initial phenomenological features provide a kind of structural background for a renewed phenomenological account of an embodied spiritual life. Once they have passed through a more practical/mystical 'bath', they still retain their own structural strength, but appear in more intense light or with a

more concrete flavour. It seems to me then that Husserl's late and awkward concept of 'transcendental flesh' needs to be more appropriately renamed. The phrase that has occurred to me so far is 'lucidity of the body'.<sup>5</sup>

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### Notes

1. O. Clément, *Corps de mort et de gloire, Petite introduction à une théopoétique du corps*, Paris, Desclée de Brouwer, 1995.
2. Tulku Urguyen Rinpoché, *Rainbow Painting, A Collection of Miscellaneous Aspects of Development and Completion*, Hong Kong–Aarhus, Boudhanah, 1995.
3. N. Depraz, 'Naître à soi-même', *Alter*, journal of phenomenology, no. 1, *Naître et mourir*, Paris, 1993. See also M. Henry, *C'est moi la vérité, Pour une philosophie du christianisme*, Paris, Seuil, 1996.
4. See D. Zahavi, *Self-awareness and Alterity*, Evanston, IL, Northwestern, 1999.
5. Let me just refer here to my essay in N. Depraz, *Lucidité du corps. De l'empirisme transcendantal en phénoménologie*, Dordrecht, Kluwer, 2001.