

Examples of the Essence of Being



Beings that maintain a certain form across generations transmit information, accumulated through evolution, to their offspring by storing it in a high-molecular compound called DNA. This can be mistaken for “memories from a previous life.” But when an organism dies, its body—and its mental activities, memories included—normally vanish entirely; only the information needed for survival is passed on through DNA. What is stored there is not the body or psyche of an individual but the basic elements necessary for the survival of the **species**—and these are shared across conspecifics.

Among members of the same species, nearly 100% of DNA-encoded information is shared. “Although humans are very similar to some other animals, humans differ **in degree**, not **in kind**, when it comes to thinking, cognition, tool use, ethics, altruism, religion, language, and nobility of character. ... Chimpanzees also think, perceive, use tools, and exhibit devotion. Chimpanzees and humans share 99.6% of their *active genes* (the figure is 96% for gorillas).” 1)

“About 46% of the proteins found in yeast are also found in humans. ... Forty-three percent of nematode proteins, 61% of fruit fly proteins, and 75% of pufferfish

proteins show clear sequence similarity to human proteins. ... Roughly 90% of the structural domains in human proteins also exist in the proteins of flies and nematodes. Hence even proteins 'unique' to humans may in fact be nothing more than mixtures of proteins found in fruit flies." 2)

In earlier times—before we knew that DNA exists and that it stores information essential for life—people sensed the *effects* of such a thing yet could not grasp its objective reality. They therefore posited a separate entity from body and mind and called it "spirit." Sometimes they treated "spirit" as something that included mental activity; sometimes they misunderstood it as a higher-order principle that influenced or governed the body. But given modern scientific knowledge of what this entity really is, it can no longer remain an object of mystery.

Computers process immense amounts of information by combining just two symbols, 0 and 1, in a binary code—a capacity we've seen explode over the past sixty years. By contrast, DNA encodes information by combining *four* bases—A (adenine), G (guanine), C (cytosine), and T (thymine)—in a **quaternary** digital code to build the proteins that become cells, and this information is shared. Its latent capacity far exceeds that of computers. Given the right environment, DNA—with its staggering digital information-processing power—can generate all manner of living forms. The elaborate web a spider weaves or the intricate nests birds build testify to the astonishing level of information recorded in DNA.

"DNA is a digital code, like a computer code. And DNA carries the digital information of parents to children and thence to generations beyond. The information transferred is not a blueprint. It is not, in any sense, a map of the baby. ... It is a set of instructions on *how to make* a baby, which is very different from a blueprint. It's more like a recipe for baking a cake." 3)

DNA uses four bases to produce a vast variety of proteins. This is true not only of humans but of every plant—including seaweeds—every animal—including fruit flies—and even bacteria. That universality is evidence that all life on Earth descends from a single-celled ancestor.



"Mycelium has long been the architect of cooperation among fungi, plants, bacteria, and animals, quietly networking their communications and transport. Ninety percent of all grasses on Earth engage in mutualistic relationships with mycelia. They exchange nutrients, messages, and even empathy—not just within the same species, but across all life. ... In a forest, when one tree is cut down, other trees extend the tips of their roots toward the stricken one and, through mycelial networks, deliver life-supporting substances—water, sugars, and other nutrients. Sustained transfusions from its neighbors can keep a mere stump alive for decades, even centuries." 4) "Electrical signals transmitted through roots travel at the slow pace of about a third of an inch (≈ 1 cm) per second. Why would trees send such signals through their cells? Because trees need to communicate, and electrical signaling is one among their various modes. They also 'talk' through smells and tastes." 5) German forester Peter Wohlleben notes further that trees share friendship and affection, build social safety nets, and even observe their own etiquette—only

at a much slower tempo.

When you eat food, it is absorbed and becomes part of the form that is *you*. Whether the food was plant or animal, once incorporated it no longer resembles its previous form. Yet at the level of essence—proteins, fats, and their subcomponents—the basics remain and now compose a portion of you. In that sense, what you eat is transformed into your form. Did the food “disappear”? How should we understand its transformation as it is digested and remade into a different form? By this logic, a human body is composed of the parts of countless plants and animals.

And just as shared meals shape our bodies, people who live together long share the same foods and thus grow to resemble one another. The effect is not confined to humans; it extends to companion animals and to the microbiota that live with us. In Korean the word for “family,” *sikgu* (食口), literally means “mouths that eat together”—an apt expression indeed. Share the same food long enough, and convergence is inevitable; we become one.

Consider another example. A fish is cooked and shared among several people; the scraps are washed down a drain. Is the fish that was caught and cooked “dead”? As a *form*, yes. But its constituents enter human bodies and come alive again as parts of them. The scraps, too, become food for other plants, animals, or microbes, to become parts of them. Through the food web those constituents persist, ever transforming—until, when humans eat plants or animals from that web, they return once more to human bodies.

Judged by **form**, the fish dies when it is hauled from the water and ceases to

breathe. Judged by **constituents**, it does not. Its cells, molecules, atoms—even the *Nosome* (無有)—endure in one guise or another, persisting through repeated transformations. Is this not, in a truer sense, *resurrection* and *reincarnation*?

Every moment, countless constituents of every being's form complete their lifespans or depart for other reasons. In humans, it is said that after roughly ten years the body's components have been entirely renewed—we change into a new body each decade. If the scientific phenomena above are real, we may suppose that these departing fundamentals (atoms, quarks, etc.) continually recombine into new forms according to energy states determined by each moment's actions. A departing element may, through a brief contact, be transmitted and remade as part of another being; or it may wander far before joining with something else. Along the way it may become part of a plant, or an animal, or—in some cases—of an inanimate object.

At every moment these departing fundamentals flow among beings, and even the lightest contact swaps the immense cloud of microbes that surround us. This is why the Buddha's saying, "Even the merest brushing of sleeves is an *in-yeon* (karmic connection)," so beautifully captures a natural phenomenon.

Richard Dawkins puts it splendidly: "Matter flows from place to place and momentarily comes together to be *you*. Whatever you are, therefore, you are not the stuff of which you are made." If that doesn't make the hairs on the back of your neck stand up, read it again until they do. It matters. 6)

Putting it all together: if we examine the metamorphoses of any being with care, we see that **all beings are one**, and that **all beings persist eternally through transformations of form**.

Sources

1. **Pale Blue Dot**, Carl Sagan, 1994: 27
2. **DNA: The Secret of Life**, James D. Watson, Kachi, 2003: 242–243
3. **Outgrowing God** (*Korean ed. title: 신, 만들어진 위험*), Richard Dawkins, Kim Young-sa, 2021: 271
4. **Cosmos**, Ann Druyan, National Geographic, 2020: 204
5. **The Hidden Life of Trees**, Peter Wohlleben, Ludwig Verlag, 2016: vii
6. **Outgrowing God** (*Korean ed. title: 신, 만들어진 위험*), Richard Dawkins, Kim Young-sa, 2021: 331