The Curious Case of the Conscious Corpse: A Medieval Buddhist Thought Experiment

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Abstract One of the arguments that has been directed against the Buddhist *anātman* ("non-self") theory, by Dan Zahavi among others, is that the doctrine cannot account for why we never mistake our own bodies for the bodies of others. This is not, however, a new objection; it can be found, for example, in a list of objections to the *anātman* doctrine in the *Dazhidulun* ("Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom"), a medieval compendium attributed to Nāgārjuna and compiled and translated (and perhaps partially authored) by Kumārajīva in the early fifth century. The text offers several responses to this objection, the most interesting of which is the claim that there is indeed an instance of a person experiencing himself as another. We then hear the tale of a young man who went through a "body transplant"—his body is replaced, piece by piece, with that of a corpse. In my chapter, I analyze this amusing but nonetheless illuminating narrative, showing how the story is a classic example of a medieval Buddhist "thought experiment" (Gedankenspiel), which was freely altered by Buddhist authors as it was deployed in different doctrinal/philosophical contexts. I conclude with some reflections on how our approach to such didactic tales affects our understanding and appreciation of Buddhist philosophy writ large.

1 Preamble

There is now considerable enthusiasm for dialogue between the fields of cognitive science, philosophy of mind, and Buddhism. Dozens of books and articles have appeared of late exploring areas of convergence, notably analogs between theories of embodied (aka extended, embedded, or enactive) cognition emerging from cognitive science and psychology, and Abhidharma and Yogācāra models of cognition drawn from medieval Buddhism.

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C. Coseru (ed.), *Reasons and Empty Persons: Mind, Metaphysics, and Morality*, Sophia Studies in Cross-cultural Philosophy of Traditions and Cultures 36,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-13995-6_7

One early trailblazer in this field was *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience*, by Francisco Varela, Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch (1991). Here a neuroscientist, a philosopher, and a cognitive psychologist team up to show, among other things, how Buddhist insights can help make sense of new data coming out of cognitive science. Varela worked with the Dalai Lama to establish the Mind & Life Institute, which would come to play a crucial role, both intellectually and financially, in the support and dissemination of research that spans Buddhism and Western science. And there are now several other organizations involved in fostering such research as well, including the Center for Healthy Minds at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, the Contemplative Sciences Center at the University of Virginia, and the Center for Compassion and Altruism Research and Education at Stanford University.

The recent interest in Buddhist theories of mind is fueled, in part, by critical developments in the fields of neuroscience and cognitive psychology. Research suggests that cognition is distributed widely throughout unimaginably complex neural networks, parts of which communicate only indirectly with other parts. We have direct conscious access to only a small fraction of what is going on "under the hood," and this can leave us mere bystanders when it comes to our own inner lives. Our experience of free will, agency, and self-possession is, at least in some respects, illusory, and the illusion is maintained by a natural propensity for confabulation—I unwittingly impose a narrative arc onto my fractured experience that mitigates cognitive dissonance, and this involves writing a singular and continuous but ultimately chimerical "me" into the storyline. Moreover, scientists claim to have discovered these things not through introspection and philosophical analysis but through empirical research.

These findings (and many more) threaten the common-sense belief in a unitary and autonomous agent or self or *cogito* that perdures through or stands astride the moment-to-moment flux of experience. In place of this Cartesian picture, researchers now proffer models of embodied, embedded, and/or enactive cognition that approach consciousness as an emergent phenomenon distributed throughout a system that includes both the subject and object of experience. In short, these theories attempt to do away with an autonomous "self" or *cogito*. That the Buddhists were advancing sophisticated, non-self models of cognition some two millennia ago suggests, at least to some, that they may have something useful to contribute to the topic.[1]

Unsurprisingly, this interdisciplinary dialogue has provoked controversy. Many of the neuroscientists and psychologists working in the area are themselves Buddhist practitioners, and this raises questions about their motives and objectivity. At the same time, scholars of Buddhism complain that the scientists are perpetuating ill-informed and deracinated depictions of Buddhism. And there is some truth to

[1] It should be noted that the critique of a singular and perduring self has a long history in the West that predates the intervention of cognitive science. Its modern philosophical articulation is associated closely with Derek Parfit (1984), whose analysis of self is often compared with that of the Buddhists.

this: Westerners, including scientists, are sometimes drawn to Buddhism out of the naïve conviction that, once stripped of its cultural accretions, Buddhism is a rational, atheistic, and eminently empirical science of the mind. In his 2008 book, *Buddhism and Science: A Guide for the Perplexed*, Donald Lopez chronicles earlier apologetic attempts, stretching back some 150 years, to cast Buddhism as scientific—attempts that now seem misconceived if not daft. Lopez believes that, given time and critical distance, the more recent efforts to present Buddhism as a science of mind will fare no better. That book was followed by *The Scientific Buddha: His Short and Happy Life* (2012), in which Lopez does more than ridicule the notion that Buddhism is compatible with science. Here he argues that approaching Buddhism as empirical and scientific forestalls the possibility of a more valuable engagement with its teachings, one that focuses on Buddhism's trenchant critique of the philosophical and ethical assumptions that underly and sustain contemporary scientific research, including research in the areas of evolutionary biology, cognitive science, and psychology. In short, critics like Lopez believe that Buddhist materials are being read out of context, and that scientizing Buddhism runs the risk of dumbing down the science and denaturing the Buddhism.

I too put little stock in the conceit that Buddhists solved, long ago, the major philosophical and existential problems that befuddle us today. I appreciate the dangers involved in wrenching Buddhist materials from their historical and cultural contexts, and agree that researchers in this area tend to be more critical in assessing the claims and authority of modern science than they are when assessing the claims and authority of Buddhism. Be that as it may, the critiques are typically predicated on assumptions about historical and cultural alterity—the notion that there is an unbridgeable gap between our modern, secular, scientific worldview, and the enchanted worldview of medieval Buddhists. And I believe that this assumption can be pushed too far.

In my own forays into this area I have focused on some rather peculiar products of the medieval scholastic imagination, including (1) *nirodha-samāpatti*, which is a meditative state in which all cognition has temporarily ceased, leaving the yogi in what is tantamount to a vegetative coma; (2) the "beings without conception" (*asaṃjñika-sattvāḥ*), who are creatures in a supernal realm who have bodies but no minds; and (3) the indigenous Chinese Buddhist doctrine of the buddha-nature of insentient objects (*wuqing foxing* 無情佛性), which holds that objects such as grass and walls and roof tiles are inherently awakened. Such doctrines might be regarded as the musings of credulous exegetes with too much time on their hands, but this, I believe, is a hasty and uncharitable misreading. On closer look, these notions turn out to be sophisticated "thought experiments" (*Gedankenexperiment*) bearing on existential conundrums related to insentience, death, and the problem of thinking about non-conceptual experience. In short, the philosophical quandaries that motivated these medieval thought experiments are akin to those that continue to perplex philosophers today (Sharf 2014).

Thought experiments are typically used to elicit an intuitive or even visceral response that will, it is hoped, throw light on a particular conceptual puzzle. Insofar as they aim to engage deep-seated or pre-reflective sentiments, they may better

survive the journey across temporal, linguistic, and cultural distances than do other registers of philosophical discourse. Or at least, this is one thesis to be entertained below.

The use of thought experiments goes back to the very beginnings of philosophy. If people recall only one thing from Plato, it is likely the allegory of prisoners chained in a cave able to see only shadows on the cave wall. Descartes's "evil demon" (aka the "deceiving god") is an equally memorable image, used, not unlike Plato's cave, to distinguish truth from the way things merely seem. Today philosophers are more apt to draw their thought experiments from science fiction than from theology. In order to elicit and explore epistemological skepticism, philosophers now talk of brains-in-vats, or living in the Matrix or in a holodeck. To hone their thinking about mind-body duality, they contemplate brain transplants and teleportation. "Philosophical zombies"—beings like us in every way except for their lack of an inner life or subjective awareness—take center stage in discussions of the nature of mind and consciousness. The Turing test, which posits a machine that so perfectly emulates human responses that it seems sentient, is used to the same effect, as are the androids and cyborgs that populate films like *Terminator*, *Bladerunner*, *Westworld*, *Ex Machina*, and so on. (At what point should we consider such beings sentient or conscious? Is there a difference in kind between them and us, or is the difference one of degree?)

Thought experiments are particularly popular in debates over *qualia*. Daniel Dennett proposed a "brainstorm machine" that wires the subjective experience of one person to another, while Ned Block conjures an "inverted earth"—a planet exactly like the earth except that the colors are reversed. In "Mary's room," Frank Jackson imagines a talented color scientist, Mary, who has spent her entire life mastering the neurology of color vision while living in a black and white room. (When she finally exits the room and experiences color for the first time, does she learn something new?) Another one of Block's thought experiments—the "China brain"—envisions each and every person in China assuming the role of a single neuron such that, connected by walkie-talkies, they collectively simulate the activity of a single brain. (Could this collectivity be considered "conscious"?) These are, of course, wildly implausible and contrived scenarios, but that is precisely the point. Daniel Dennett calls them "intuition pumps"—they are intended to draw upon, fine-tune, and sometimes overturn our intuitions pertaining to difficult problems—problems of free-will and determinism, of self-identity and mind-body dualism, of the nature of consciousness, and of the epistemic warrants for our beliefs.

Medieval Buddhist thought experiments reveal an interest in many of these same questions. This is not to say that the Buddhists resolved anything—Buddhists, like philosophers today, gave rise to a welter of competing arguments and positions. Rather, my point is that, despite contemporary academic fashions that foreground difference and alterity if not incommensurability, many of the underlying existential issues that preoccupy philosophers today are the same ones that preoccupied Buddhist philosophers centuries ago. And this claim finds support in the medieval Buddhist use of thought experiments that engage, in a matter immediately accessible to us, our embodiment—the jarring sense in which we *inhabit*, and at the same time *are*, our bodies.

In claiming that Buddhist notions of *nirodha*, or the mindless gods, or the buddha-nature of roof tiles were intended as thought experiments, I open myself to the familiar criticism that I am merely finding new ways to wrench Buddhist dogmas out of context in order to make them seem sophisticated, topical, and philosophically salient. Some are wont to insist that the Buddhists took such notions *literally*, and that I am ignoring the cosmological, soteriological, and exegetical interests of the monks who wrote on these subjects. Which is why I was so excited when I came upon the tale I will discuss here—the man whose body was replaced with a corpse. I hope that this example will convince the skeptics. But to make sense of my reading of the corpse-man narrative, I need to retrace the steps that led me here.

2 Zahavi's Critique

In an edited volume on the philosophical notion of no-self (Siderits et al. 2011), the phenomenologist Dan Zahavi contributed the only chapter explicitly critical of the Buddhist position. While he recognizes areas of overlap between Buddhist thought and contemporary currents in cognitive science and philosophy of mind, he is not convinced by the Buddhist doctrine of no-self (*anātman*). His critique, in short, is that the Buddhist construal of the *ātman* is so narrow as to render its denial of little philosophical import. That is to say: the Buddhist understanding of *ātman* as a metaphysical "soul" that is eternal, unchanging, and hence not subject to causation, is too easy a target, and thus the refutation of such an *ātman* contributes little to contemporary phenomenology. Zahavi's alternative is what he calls a "minimal self," which he believes is necessary to account for my first-person perspective—a perspective that is, in the end, *mine* if only insofar as it doesn't belong to anyone else.

In making his case he borrows Sartre's notion of *ipseity* (selfhood, from the Latin *ipse*), as well as Husserl's notion of *Meinheit* (mineness) to denote the irreducible and prereflective nature of consciousness experience—that which makes all experience appear to *me* rather than to someone else. He insists that this is not a quality or characteristic or discoverable content of experience. It is rather the "distinctive givenness or *how* of experience. It refers to the first-personal presence of experience. It refers to the fact the experiences I am living through are given differently (but not necessarily better) to me than to anybody else" (Zahavi 2011: 59). Zahavi's "minimal self" is a sort of middle ground between postulating an unchanging soul substance on the one hand, or a "manifold of interrelated changing experiences" on the other. This minimal self is intended to foreground the "first personal self-givenness" of experience; in Zahavi's words, "conscious mental states are given in a distinct manner, with a distinct subjective presence, to the subject whose mental states they are, a way that in principle is unavailable to others" (Zahavi 2011: 59–60). Zahavi's critique of the Buddhists is thus simple: granted that the "self" I imagine is in some sense illusory, it is, nonetheless, *my* illusion, rooted in *my* sense of a body. Zahavi's "minimal self" is intended to denote this unique, continuous, and ineliminable perspective.

Zahavi is certainly not the first to raise this objection. The history of Indian Buddhist philosophy is, in part, the history of Buddhists defending their controversial if not confounding *anātman* doctrine against a host of objections, including ones similar if not identical to the one raised by Zahavi. Take, for example, the Nyāya philosopher Vātsyāyana and his later commentator Uddyotakara. They critique the Buddhist no-self theory as incapable of explaining either the synchronic or the diachronic unity of our phenomenal experience. (Synchronically, the *anātman* theory, at least in its early Ābhidharmika formulations, fails to explain cross-modal binding; diachronically, it fails to account for memory, personal identity, and other phenomena that require temporal continuity. See below.) In short, to the critics, the Buddhist claim that we are simply a series or continuum of causally linked momentary events with nothing that perdures from one instant to the next cannot accommodate the fact that I seem to have a unique perspective on *my own* continuum.

Even some within the Buddhist fold found the *anātman* doctrine challenging. The Pudgalavādins, for example, raised concerns not unlike those of the Nyāya, and they proffered the notion of a *pudgala* or "person" to take up some of the slack. The *pudgala*, which is a sort of emergent entity that is neither identical to nor separate from the five aggregates, serves much the same explanatory role as does Zahavi's minimal self: it accounts for my ineliminable sense that whatever happens in my mental stream happens to me and not to another.[2]

While positions analogous to Zahavi's can already be found in the Indian tradition, I still found his articulation of the critique in phenomenological terms effective, and I felt that the efforts of others in the same volume to refute Zahavi, notably George Dreyfus, never fully hit the mark. Dreyfus defends the Buddhist position, arguing that while I may insist that I don't *believe* in an eternal and unchanging soul, psychologically I still behave as if I do. And it is this reified psychological self, not a metaphysical soul, that is the source of clinging. But this doesn't respond to Zahavi's philosophical point, which is to give due attention to the fact that I don't confuse my first-person experience with that of somebody else. (This position is known in philosophy as "immunity to error through misidentification.")

As touched on above, critiques of *anātman* generally proceed along two broad axes: one synchronic and one diachronic. The synchronic issue is known in cognitive psychology as the "binding problem." How is information that emerges from different sense faculties and that is processed in widely distributed areas of the nervous system synthesized so as to create the unified phenomenal world of our experience? This was a serious problem for the Buddhists: if there is no overarching self, why do we seem to be singular selves rather than six parallel but independent selves, each associated with one of the six sense registers? Some Buddhist systems manage this by extending the functions of the sixth sense, namely mind. In Sarvāstivāda systems, for example, in addition to its role as an independent sense faculty with its own immaterial sense objects (*dharmas*), the mind faculty

[2] There is a vast literature on the Buddhist *anātman* theory; for an insightful overview that includes a discussion of both the external (Nyāya) and internal (Pudgalavāda) critiques, see Kapstein (2001: 28–177), as well as the discussions in the chapters by Coseru and Ganeri in this volume.

(*mano-vijñāna*) also manages the "impressions" (*ākāra*) transduced from the five material senses (Sharf 2018: 829–831). It is perhaps to clear up the resulting ambiguities that later Yogācāra theorists offload some of the cognitive burden carried by the mind faculty to the faculty of "mentation" (*manas*, aka "defiled mentation," *kliṣṭa-manas*). It is the *manas* that ultimately binds together the six sense consciousnesses, creating the illusory impression of a unitary self, together with the psychological attachments and afflictions that invariably attend it. (Note that even in later Yogācāra there can be a blurring of the functions of the *mano-vijñāna* and the *manas*.) So it would seem that, despite their adherence to no-self, some Buddhist exegetes felt compelled to posit entities like the *pudgala* or the *manas*—entities whose function is similar to that of Zahavi's "minimal self"—to account for cognitive binding.

The problem with *anātman* is not synchronic binding alone. There is also the problem of diachronic identity, which is at the heart of Zahavi's critique. Why do I not confuse my mind-body continuum with that of someone else? Why do my past and my memories seem to belong to *me* rather than to another? That Buddhists repeatedly felt compelled to respond to these issues suggests that the critique had traction.

3 The Corpse Man in the *Da zhidu lun*

At the same time as I was reading Zahavi, I happened to be going through the "Perfection of Charity" (*tan boluomi* 檀波羅蜜, *dāna-pāramitā*) chapter of the *Da zhidu lun* 大智度論 (**Mahāprajñāpāramitopadeśa*, "Great Treatise on the Perfection of Wisdom") along with a visiting scholar, Stefano Zacchetti, and our graduate students.[3] Among other things, the "Perfection of Charity" chapter contains an extended defense of the non-self doctrine. The interlocutor, in an attempt to refute the Buddhist *anātman* position, presents what I take to be the thrust of Zahavi's critique.

> Question: By what means do we know that there is no self? All people give rise to the notion of a self with regard to their own bodies, but they don't give rise to the notion of self with regard to other bodies. If there is no self within my own body, and yet I falsely perceive there to be a self, then as for the non-self of other bodies, I ought to give rise to the false perception of myself with regard to them as well.
>
> 問曰:何以識無我?一切人各於自身中生計我、不於他身中生我;若自身中無我、而妄見為我者、他身中無我、亦應於他身而妄見為我. (T.1509: 25.148b11-14)

This would seem to be precisely the objection raised by Zahavi. And while I had encountered versions of it elsewhere, I might not have appreciated its cogency had I not been reading Zahavi at the time.

[3] A French translation can be found in Lamotte 1944–80: 2.735–750.

In any case, without pausing, the interlocutor then raises the problem of how, given the *anātman* doctrine, the Buddhists account for the discrimination of things like colors. "Moreover, if internally there is no self, and if form and consciousness arise and pass away from moment to moment, how then do we discriminate between the colors green, yellow, red, and white? 復次、若內無我、色識念念生滅、云何分別知是色青、黃、赤、白" (T.1509: 25.148b14-16). In other words, for perception and discrimination to occur, there must be some retention of what is not immediately available to sense experience, as well as a central "work space" or "holding area" capable of juxtaposing and evaluating what is present vis-à-vis what is not. This is related to the problem of memory, any solution to which might seem to require something functionally akin to Zahavi's minimal self.

Finally, the questioner raises a familiar critique of the *anātman* doctrine:

> Moreover, if there is no self, and an individual's momentary awareness is constantly arising and passing away, then when one's life comes to an end this momentary succession also ends. To whom then do all the sinful and meritorious actions (*karma*) follow and accrue? Who experiences pain or pleasure? Who is liberated? Given the various kinds of causes and conditions, we therefore know there is a self.
>
> 復次、若無我、今現在人識、漸漸生滅、身命斷時亦盡、諸行罪福、誰隨誰受?誰受苦樂?誰解脫者?如是種種因緣故知有我. (T.1509: 25.148b16-19)

The first Buddhist rejoinder in the *Da zhidu lun* is clever but arguably sophistic:

> Answer: The difficulty redounds onto you. Were you to regard another body as yourself, then there would be even more reason to ask, "How is it that you give rise to the notion of self in a body that is not yours?" Because it arises from the causes and conditions of the five aggregates, it is empty and without self. The twenty views of personhood arise from the causes and conditions of ignorance. This belief in a self emerges from the continuous succession of the five aggregates. And because they emerge from *these* five aggregates, we construe *these* five aggregates as the self; they are not located in the body of another because of habitual conditioning.
>
> 答曰:此俱有難!若於他身生計我者、復當言「何以不自身中生計我」?復次、五眾因緣生故空無我。從無明因緣生二十身見。是我見、自於五陰相續生。以從此五眾緣生故、即計此五眾為我。不在他身、以其習故. (T.1509: 25.148b19-24)

The Buddhist then continues by focusing specifically on the issue of why we do not locate our own self within the bodies of others.

> Moreover, if you had a soul 神, it might then be possible to impute one's own self to another. But you are not yet clear on whether you have a soul or not, so how can you ask about taking another as yourself. This is like someone asking you about the horns of a hare, and you reply that they are similar to the horns of a horse. If the horns of a horse really existed, then they might help us understand the horns of hares. But though we are even less clear about horns of horses, you still want to appeal to them to understand the horns of hares.
>
> Moreover, because one gives rise to the notion of a self within one's own body, you claim there is a soul. You then claim that this soul pervades everywhere. But then you ought to consider the bodies of others as yourself! Therefore, you can't claim: "Within my own body there arises what I consider to be a self, but in the bodies of others it does not arise, and therefore I know there is a soul."
>
> Moreover, there are *indeed* people who give rise to a self with regard to other things. When non-Buddhists sit in meditation and engage in the "all-pervading earth-element contemplation," they perceive the earth as if it were the self, and the self as if it were the earth.

And they do the same with water, fire, wind, and space. As they are mixed up, they regard the bodies of others as themselves.

復次、若有神者、可有彼我。汝神有無未了、而問彼我!其猶人問兔角、答似馬角。馬角若實有、可以證兔角；馬角猶尚未了、而欲以證兔角。復次、自於身生我故、便自謂有神。汝言「神遍」、亦應計他身為我。以是故、不應言「自身中生計我心、於他身不生、故知有神」。復次、有人於他物中我心生、如外道坐禪人、用地一切入觀時、見地則是我、我則是地、水、火、風、空、亦如是。顛倒故、於他身中亦計我. (T.1509: 25.148b24-c4)

We then come to the *pièce de résistance*, the case of the corpse-man, in which someone really does locate their self within the body of another.

Moreover, there are instances in which the self arises with respect to another person. There once was a man who undertook a distant journey on assignment, and he spent a night alone in an empty hut. In the middle of the night a demon arrived carrying a corpse and placed it down in front [of the hut]. Then another demon arrived chasing after the first, and began shouting angrily at him: "That corpse is mine! How did you end up with it here?" The first demon replied: "It is mine! I brought it here myself!" The second demon said: "In fact I was the one who carried this corpse here." The two demons each grabbed one hand [of the corpse] and struggled over it. The demon said: "Here is someone we can ask." The second demon then asked the man: "Who brought this corpse here?" The man thought to himself: "These two demons are pretty strong. If I speak the truth I am certain to end up dead, but if I speak falsely I'll also end up dead. In either case there is no escape, so what is the point in lying?" So he replied: "The first demon carried the corpse here." The second demon was furious, grabbed the man's arm, pulled it off, and threw it to the ground. The first demon took one arm from the corpse and affixed it back on the man. In this fashion, both arms, both legs, the head, flanks, and indeed the [man's] *entire body* were changed [into the body of the corpse]. Thereupon the two demons joined in eating the [original] body of the man who had been transformed, wiped their mouths, and departed. The man thought to himself: "I just saw, with my own two eyes, two demons eat up my body—the body to which my mother gave birth. Do I actually now have a body or not? If I do, then it is wholly the body of another. If I don't, then what is this body?" Thinking like this made him horribly confused, like a madman.

The next morning he found the road and departed, going until he reached the previous country. There he saw a Buddhist temple and a group of monks. He was obsessed, and asked repeatedly whether his body existed or not. The monks asked, "What kind of human are you?" He answered: "I don't even know if I am human or not." The monks discussed the affair at length, and they all concurred: "This person knows non-self; it should be easy for him to attain liberation." And so they said to him: "Your body, from the very beginning to the present time, has always been without self. It is not something that just happened now. It is only the coalescence of the four elements that we consider to be 'my body.' There is no difference between your original body and the one you have today." These monks led him to the path, his defilements were extinguished, and he attained the stage of the arhat.

Hence at times other bodies can also be taken to be one's self, and thus you can't take that as evidence that there is a self.

復次、有時於他身生我、如有一人、受使遠行、獨宿空舍。夜中有鬼擔一死人來著其前、復有一鬼逐來瞋罵前鬼:「是死人是我物、汝何以擔來?」先鬼言:「是我物、我自持來。」後鬼言:「是死人實我擔來!」二鬼各捉一手爭之。前鬼言:「此有人可問。」後鬼即問:「是死人誰擔來?」是人思惟:「此二鬼力大、若實語亦當死、若妄語亦當死、俱不免死、何為妄語?」語言:「前鬼擔來。」後鬼大瞋、捉人手拔出著地、前鬼取死人一臂拊之即著。如是兩臂、兩腳、頭、脅、舉身皆易。於是二鬼共食所易人身、拭口而去。其人思惟:「我人母生身、眼見二鬼食盡、今我此身盡是他肉。我今定有身耶?為無身耶?若以為有、盡是他身；若以為無、今現有身。」如是思惟、其心迷悶、譬如狂人。明朝尋路而去、到前國土、見有佛塔眾僧、不

> 論餘事、但問己身為有為無?諸比丘問:「汝是何人?」答言:「我亦不自知是人、非人?」即為眾僧廣說上事。諸比丘言:「此人自知無我、易可得度。」而語之言:「汝身從本已來、恒自無我、非適今也。但以四大和合故、計為我身、如汝本身、與今無異。」諸比丘度之為道、斷諸煩惱、即得阿羅漢。是為有時他身亦計為我。不可以有彼此故謂有我. (T: 1509: 25.148c5-28)

Among other things, this fanciful tale illustrates the point made at the beginning of the passage, namely, that even if one did in fact suddenly experience oneself in the body of another, rather than constituting evidence of a perduring self, it would actually undermine it!

We could pause here to consider the strengths and weaknesses of the *Da zhidu lun* defense of the *anātman* doctrine.[4] But as so much ink has been spilled on the philosophical coherence of the Buddhist *anātman* theory already, I would prefer to move directly to the issue at hand: Did the author(s) of the *Da zhidu lun* (whomever they may have been) take the corpse-man tale literally—as historical evidence of an actual body swap? Or was it intended as a somewhat playful thought experiment? The answer, I believe, can be found in looking at their sources.

4 The Genealogy of the Corpse-man Tale

The *Da zhidu lun*, traditionally considered an Indic commentary on the *Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra* by Nāgārjuna, was rendered into Chinese by Kumārajīva between 402 and 406. The provenance, dating, and authorship of the Indic original remains an open question, but the current consensus among scholars is that the attribution to Nāgārjuna cannot be trusted, and that while the Chinese text is based on an Indian commentary, it is replete with interpolations and glosses that were likely introduced by Kumārajīva and his translation team.[5] Nevertheless, the section to which the corpse-man story belongs bears all the marks of Indian philosophical disputation, and there is no reason to doubt its Indic provenance.

We are fortunate to have access to several alternative versions of the corpse-man tale, notably those found in two Chinese translations of the "Biography of King Aśoka" (*Aśokāvadāna*, *Aśokarājāvadāna*). The textual history of this *avadāna* is complex, and the Chinese versions contain considerable material not found in the surviving Sanskrit text which is transmitted as part of the *Divyāvadāna*. The corpse-man tale is among the material not found in the *Divyāvadāna* version; nor is it found in the legends of King Aśoka from other Sanskrit or Pali sources. Another complicating factor is dating: scholars generally place the composition/compilation of the *Aśokāvadāna* to the second or third century A.D., but for reasons outlined below

[4] For a brief reflection on its philosophical import, see Ganeri (2007: 212–215), and Ganeri (2012:115–117).

[5] See esp. the extended discussion in Lamotte 1944–80: 3.viii–xliv, who concludes that the original text likely dates to the early fourth century, as well as the convenient summary in Zacchetti (2015: 190–191).

this date turns out to be problematic. Be that as it may, evidence suggests that the corpse-man tale that survives in the first Chinese translation of the *Aśokāvadāna* precedes, and represents a likely source for, the version found in the *Da zhidu lun*.[6]

The first translation—the "Biography of King Aśoka" (*Ayuwang zhuan* 阿育王傳, T.2042)—was supposedly completed in 306 by An Faqin 安法欽 during the Western Qin Dynasty. However, Antonello Palumbo has disputed this attribution, which he argues is based on the much later and notoriously unreliable *Lidai sanbao ji* 歷代三寶紀 of 598. On the basis of his analysis of early catalogues, along with internal evidence, Palumbo believes the translation was actually produced around the time of Kumārajīva, that is, at roughly the same time as the *Da zhidu lun*.[7] The second translation, the "Scripture of King Aśoka" (*Ayuwang jing* 阿育王經, T.2043), was completed in 512 by Sengqiepoluo 僧伽婆羅 (Saṃghabhara? Saṃghavara? Saṃghavarman?, 460–524).

In both translations, the corpse-man story figures in a series of anecdotes related to Aśoka's teacher, the famous Buddhist master Upagupta. Each of the short episodes centers on Upagupta's pedagogical gifts—his ability to identify and help the disciple overcome the specific impediment that prevents him from making headway. The impediments include lust, gluttony, greed, lethargy, pride, and so on, and in each case Upagupta devises a clever ploy, often utilizing his supernatural powers, to help the student quell his affliction and attain liberation.[8] The corpse-man story appears in the case of a disciple whose overwhelming obstruction is his vanity. The narrative in the first Chinese translation, the *Ayuwang zhuan*, runs as follows.

> In the Kingdom of Mathura there lived the son of a noble family, who, taking leave of his father and mother, wished to go to Reverend Upagupta to ordain [as a monk]. Although he left lay life, he was still very vain and remained attached to his body, and so he wished to return home. So he went to the Reverend to take his leave so as to return home. The Reverend said: "Then you should depart tomorrow." The next day the man paid obeisance to the feet of the Reverend and took his leave. Midway on his journey he saw a shrine and had [second] thoughts about it: "If I return home, my mother and father will make a big deal out of it, so it would be better were I to spend the night in this shrine and then return directly to the Reverend tomorrow.
>
> That night the Reverend magically produced an ogre (*yakṣa*) who arrived [at the shrine] carrying a corpse. He then [produced] another ogre who arrived empty-handed. The two demons started arguing. The first said: "I came carrying this corpse." The second said:

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[6] On the various versions of the *Aśokāvadāna* see Deeg (2009: 12); Lamotte (1958: 261–272); Mukhopadhyaya (1963); Palumbo (2010: 20); Przyluski (1923); Strong (1983); and Wille (2000). Translations of the corpse-man tale from the Chinese versions can be found in Chavannes (1911:72–77); Li (1993: 164–165); Przyluski (1923: 381–382); and Strong (1992: 128–129).

[7] Palumbo's argument is based in part on (1) the dates for the dissemination of the Aśoka legend in China, which is not attested until the late fourth century; (2) the absence of any mention of the text in the more reliable *Chu sanzang ji ji* 出三藏記集 of 515; (3) the fact that the *Lidai sanbao ji* attribution appears to be drawn from a lost catalogue, the *Jin shi zalu* 晉世雜錄, which is itself a likely forgery; and (4) the translation terminology of the *Ayuwang zhuan*, which is typical of that which became standard only after the circulation of Kumārajīva's translations in the early fifth century (Palumbo 2010: 20 n.31).

[8] For a full discussion see esp. Strong (1992:118–144).

> "I came carrying the corpse." The former demon said: "I have a witness. This man saw me arrive carrying the corpse." At this point the man thought to himself: "Today I'll certainly die, so I might as well just tell the truth." So he said to the second demon: "This corpse was brought here by the first demon, so it is not yours to claim." The second demon flew into a rage and yanked off the man's shoulder. The first demon then took the shoulder from the corpse and affixed it to the man as it was before. The second demon then yanked off one arm. The first demon then took an arm from the corpse and affixed it to the man as it was before. The second demon then yanked off his two legs. The first demon used the legs of the corpse to restore him as before. Then the two demons joined in eating the fresh pieces of meat that had been yanked from the man, and summarily departed. Thereupon, the man's attachment to his body completely vanished. Afterwards, arriving at the Reverend's residence he completed his monastic ordination, and receiving [Upagupta's] instructions in the dharma he attained the stage of an *arhat*. He then took a counting stick and placed it in the cave.[9]
>
> 摩突羅國有一族姓子、辭父母欲向尊者鞠多所求欲出家。既出家已、極愛著身故復欲還家。便往尊者所辭欲還家。尊者語言:「且往明日。」明日禮尊者足即欲還去。道中見天寺而作是念:「若還向家、父母或能為我作大事。不如即住此天寺宿、明日當還詣尊者所。」尊者即夜化作一夜叉擔死人來。更有一夜叉空手而來。二鬼共諍。一言:「我擔死人來。」第二者言:「我擔死人來。」前一鬼言:「我有證人。此人見我擔死人來。」時此人念言:「我今畢定死竟應作實語。」語後鬼言:「此死人者前鬼擔來、非是汝許。」後鬼大瞋拔其一髀、前鬼以死人髀還續如故。後鬼復拔一臂、前鬼更拔死人臂還復補處。後拔其兩腳、前鬼悉以彼死人腳補之如本。如是二鬼共食所拔新肉即時出去。於是愛身之心即便都滅。後至尊者所度使出家、為說法要得阿羅漢。便令便令擲籌著於窟中. (T.2042: 50.123b3-20)

There are a number of conspicuous differences between this tale and the one found in the *Da zhidu lun*. Recall that the *Da zhidu lun* provides nothing by way of a backstory. We are told only that a man on an unspecified journey encounters the demons while spending the night at an empty road-side hut. But in the *Aśokāvadāna* version, we learn that the man in question is a disciple of Upagupta, and there is nothing accidental about his encounter with the demons—the demons are conjured intentionally by Upagupta to teach the young man a lesson. But the most striking difference, for our purposes, is that in the *Da zhidu lun* story the man's body is replaced *entirely* with that of the corpse, while in the *Aśokāvadāna*, it is only a shoulder, an arm, and two legs that are replaced. This apparently is all that is needed to cure the student of his delight in his body. (Who wouldn't be cured!) As such, this tale is not about an existential identity crisis but rather about overcoming vanity. Note also how the shift in context alters the significance of the demons devouring the man's flesh. In the *Aśokāvadāna* version, seeing the demons feasting on his severed limbs serves to heighten the novice's disgust for his own flesh, which just a moment before was a source of pride. In the *Da zhidu lun* tale, the image of the two demons feasting on the poor man's *entire body* intensifies the existential confusion—the odd sensation of watching from afar as one's body is being devoured.

Moving now to the 512 translation of the *Aśokāvadāna*, we find some curious variances that, despite its later date, warrant our attention.

[9] On the placing of the counting stick (*śalākā*) into the cave, which occurs whenever one of Upagupta's disciples becomes an *arhat*, see Strong (1992: 141–143).

In the Kingdom of Mathura there was a young man who sought permission from his parents to leave home as a monk. He traveled to Upagupta's place, and upon arriving paid obeisance to his feet and said, "Venerable: may I have permission to leave home to be a monk and receive full ordination in accord with the Buddha's teachings? I want to practice chastity in accordance with the teachings of the World Honored One." Upagupta discerned that the young man was still bound by attachment to his body. So he said: "Welcome. I will bestow the precepts on you." The man, having heard this, paid obeisance to his feet, but wanted [first?] to return to his family. Along the way he had this thought: "Should I return home, I may encounter obstacles and be unable to become a monk." Alongside the road there was a shrine where he decided to spend the night. Upagupta used his supernatural powers to create two ogres (*rākṣasa*). One entered into the shrine carrying a dead corpse, while the other arrived empty-handed. When they entered the shrine they began to argue over the corpse. One said: "I got the corpse!" The other said: "I got the corpse!" They argued in this way among themselves, and being unable to agree, they asked the man: "Which one of us came to this shrine bearing the corpse?" The man thought to himself: "If I tell the truth the ogre who came empty-handed will certainly kill me. But then if I don't tell the truth, the ogre who arrived carrying the corpse will most certainly kill me. In either case I end up dead, so I ought not lie. He then said to the ogres [pointing to the first one]: "It was that one who came with the corpse."

Thereupon the ogre who came empty-handed pulled at [the man's] arm wanting to eat it. Then the ogre who came with the corpse started pulling as well in an attempt to free him. Then [the empty-handed ogre] pulled at his foot wanting to eat it. The ogre with the corpse started pulling as well in an attempt to free him. This went on for a long time until the sun came up. After two days passed he went back to Upagupta's place, and arriving there he became a monk. He fervently cultivated the way and attained the stage of an *arhat*. He then took a counting stick and deposited it in the cave.

摩偷羅國有一男子、啟其父母求欲出家。往優波笈多處。至已禮足、白言:「大德、我得佛法中出家作比丘受具足不。我欲於世尊法中修行梵行。」優波笈多見其於身為愛所縛、語言:「善來。我當與汝出家。」其人聞已禮長老足欲還其家。即於中路作是思惟:「我若至家或有留難不得出家。」於其路中有一神廟便在中宿。優波笈多即以神力作二羅剎。一持死尸入於廟中。一則空往。既入廟已、共諍死尸。一言:「我得此尸。」一人言:「我得此尸。」於是二羅剎互共相諍。既不自決而問此人:「誰將此尸來入廟耶?」此人思惟:「若我實言彼空來者必當殺我。若不實語將尸來者復應殺我。乃可受死、不應妄語。」即語鬼言:「是彼將來。」時空來鬼即牽其臂而欲食之。將尸鬼者助其牽掣令得免脫。又牽其脚而欲食之。將尸鬼者復助牽掣令得免脫。如此良久遂至日出。經二日後往優波笈多處。至已為其出家、精進修道即得阿羅漢果。乃至取籌置石室中.[10]

There are a number of differences between the two Chinese renderings of the *Aśokāvadāna*, including the fact that, in the later text, the young man had not yet ordained when he encountered the demons. But the most notable change is that, in the later version, the second demon doesn't succeed in yanking off and devouring the man's limbs. Rather, the two demons engage in a tug of war with the man's body, with one trying to tear it apart so as to eat it, and the other trying to set him free. This terrifying ordeal goes on throughout the night, and in the end the demons leave without eating anything at all.

Something seems a bit odd with this later rendition. For one thing, it lacks much of the punch of the two earlier versions. Gone is the horror of imagining what it would be like to witness one's body parts exchanged with those of a corpse, and then to watch as demons devour one's flesh—ordeals that, in the early *Aśokāvadāna*

[10] T.2043: 50.165b11-c2; cf. translation in Li (1993: 164–165).

translation, are concocted by Upagupta specifically to target the man's vanity. Note also how, in the *Da zhidu lun* and the *Ayuwang zhuan*, the corpse itself plays a critical role in the story, as it is needed to harvest replacements for the man's limbs as they are torn off. In the later *Ayuwang jing*, however, the corpse is inconsequential—it is the source of the disagreement between the demons, but they could just as well be arguing over something else. It is difficult to know what to make of these changes, but one possibility is that it is the result of a later redactor trying to remove an incongruity. Note that, unlike *the Da zhidu lun* version, the demons in the *Aśokāvadāna* tale are imaginary beings conjured by Upagupta. One might then wonder how these *imaginary* creatures, bearing what is presumably an *imaginary* corpse, could effect a real and lasting limb transplant. So it is possible that a literal-minded editor replaced the limb replacement with an easier-to-swallow magical apparition of two demons engaged in a tug of war over the disciple's body.

In any case, the question at hand is the genealogical relation between the *Da zhidu lun* account and the earlier Chinese translation, both of which appear in China around the same time, and both of which involve the transplant of body parts. The Indian *Aśokāvadāna* has been dated to the second or third century A.D. by a number of scholars,[11] but this is based in part on the received dating of the first Chinese translation, which, as we have seen, is problematic. We have also seen that the corpse-man tale appears in a linked series of anecdotes celebrating the prodigious pedagogical skills of Upagupta, and that this sequence does not appear in the extant *Aśokāvadāna* included in the *Divyāvadāna*. I would note, however, that Sanskrit fragments belonging to this sequence of tales have been found among some small palm-leaf fragments in the Schøyen collection, so there is little question that the corpse-man tale associated with Upagupta did in fact circulate in India.[12]

In terms of *genre*—a popular "Hīnayāna" *avadāna* versus a technical Mahāyāna *sūtra* commentary—one might assume that the *Aśokāvadāna* antedates the *Da zhidu lun*. But given the fluid nature of the *content* of the received texts, *genre* alone doesn't help establish a relationship between the corpse-man tales that appear therein. Nevertheless, on the basis of content I would suggest that the corpse-man in the *Ayuwang zhuan* represents an earlier stage in the historical development of the tale. Note that it figures in a sequence of stories associated with Upagupta that are related by both structure and content. These stories, each of which illustrate Upagupta's superlative teaching style, form a coherent, structurally and thematically related set, and the palm-leaf fragments found in the Schøyen collection attest to the circulation of this set in India. It seems plausible that the corpse-man tale found in the *avadāna* and associated with the Sarvāstivāda teacher Upagupta antedates, and was the inspiration for, the version found in the Mahāyāna scripture commentary.

There is yet one more reason to believe that the version of the corpse-man in the *Da zhidu lun* descends from that in the *Aśokāvadāna* rather than vice versa. The two

[11] See, for example, Mukhopadhyaya (1963: lx), and Strong (1983: 27).

[12] Wille (2000). According to Sander (2000: 293–295), the fragments are written in a "Gilgit/Bamiyan Type 1" script, which would suggest a date of no later than the seventh century.

stories disagree on whether it is only the limbs of the man that are replaced by the limbs of the corpse, or his entire body. It seems most likely that the evolution would have been from the partial limb replacement to the more dramatic whole-body transformation, rather than the other way around. In sum, the available internal and external evidence suggests that the authors/compilers/editors of the *Da zhidu lun* recognized the philosophical potential of the Upagupta corpse-man tale which was already in circulation. Borrowing it from an earlier source, possibly the *Aśokāvadāna*, they deftly tweaked it to suit their purposes.

Before concluding, I should mention one more Buddhist tale in which we encounter two demons squabbling over a corpse. This is found in the Pali "Mahāsīlava-jātaka," which is arguably earlier than, and possibly a distant ancestor to, the versions we have been discussing so far.[13] As this is a long and complex tale, I will merely summarize the key points here.

> The benevolent king of Benares, Mahāsīlava (the Buddha in a former life), is an exceedingly righteous and compassionate monarch. One of his ministers (Devadatta in a former life) is exiled for misdeeds in the king's harem, and ends up as chief minister to the king of Kosala. The treacherous minister convinces the king of Kosala that it would be easy to conquer Benares, since their king, Mahāsīlava, is a pushover who would refuse to fight. Indeed, when Kosala crosses the border with his army and challenges Mahāsīlava, Mahāsīlava, against the entreaties of his ministers, refuses to take up battle and surrenders himself along with his court. The king of Kosala then takes Mahāsīlava and his one-thousand ministers to a cemetery and buries them alive up to their necks, leaving them for the jackals to devour. Even then, Mahāsīlava does not object and harbors nothing but good will toward his captors.
>
> At midnight the jackals show up. Mahāsīlava manages to clutch the chief jackal firmly in his teeth, and this keeps the other jackals at bay. As the chief jackal struggles to escape Mahāsīlava's hold, he stirs up the earth around the king allowing Mahāsīlava to break free. Mahāsīlava then frees the rest of his ministers.
>
> Mahāsīlava, still in the cemetery, then comes upon an exposed corpse along with two demons who are arguing over how to divide up the corpse so they can eat it. The demons, knowing that Mahāsīlava is a fair and righteous monarch, ask for his assistance in divvying up the corpse. Mahāsīlava agrees but only if the demons first help him bathe, eat, and recover his royal sword from the usurper king of Kosala. The demons oblige, using their magical powers to lavishly bathe Mahāsīlava and bedeck him with unguents, flowers, and fine clothes, feast him on fine food, and retrieve his sword. Mahāsīlava uses the sword to cut the corpse in half, and gives each demon his fair share. The demons, satiated and happy, go on to help Mahāsīlava recover his kingdom.

There is little linking the demons arguing over a corpse in the *Mahāsīlava-jātaka* to the *Aśokāvadāna* or the *Da zhidu lun*. That demons hang about in cemeteries and abandoned shrines and bicker over corpses may have been a stock motif in Indian folklore. But it does show that the motif was known to early Buddhist storytellers, and had gained a toehold in an important Buddhist paracanonical collection that may predate the texts discussed above.

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[13] Fausbøll 1877: 261–268 (*jātaka* 51 and its commentary); translation in Chalmers (1895: 128–133). There is some evidence that portions of this story, specifically the incident with the jackals, may be related to northern European folklore (Tawney 1883: 120–121). My thanks to Sean Kerr for bringing this *jātaka* to my attention.

5 Final Thoughts

There are in fact countless Indian folk tales (*kathā*) featuring demons, powerful yogis, and corpses that playfully engage issues of self-identity and embodiment. Most notable are tales about "vampires" (*vetāla*) that are able to possess and animate corpses as well as living persons. The *Vetālapañcaviṃśati* ("Twenty-five Tales of a Vampire") collection includes an arresting story about a woman who mistakenly swapped the heads of her husband and her brother; the question is then posed: which one should she now consider her husband?[14] There are also many stories of yogis who use their supernatural powers to enter and control the bodies of others, much as do the vampires (Bloomfield 1917). Medieval Indian literature provides abundant imaginative grist for the philosopher's mill.

Our own investigation has focused more narrowly on Buddhist tales involving demons arguing over a corpse. In one—the *Mahāsīlava-jātaka*—the demons seem to be included largely for their entertainment value. They provide a bit of comic relief following the burial ordeal of king Mahāsīlava, and they drive the plot line forward by allowing the king, who had already forsworn his warriors, to recover his kingdom. The authors of the later versions will tap the bickering-demon motif for its moral and/or philosophical potential. The *Aśokāvadāna* version is associated with the wise and canny Upagupta, who uses the quarrelsome demons to transplant the limbs of a corpse onto his disciple as a kind of shock therapy. This, I believe, is the probable source for the form of the tale that finds its way into the *Da zhidu lun*. The author of this later version evidently felt free to refashion the tale to suit his own purposes, namely, his multi-pronged defense of the Buddhist no-self theory.

More specifically, the author of the *Da zhidu lun* will use the demon story to refute the interlocutor's claim that our inability to mistake ourselves for others speaks to the existence of a self. On the surface then, the *Da zhidu lun* introduces the corpse-man tale as evidence that it is indeed possible to mistake oneself for another. But that our author has brazenly doctored the narrative suggests that he was not personally invested in the historical veracity of the tale, and one must presume that his intended audience was no less sophisticated. The intent, rather, is to imagine, as a thought experiment, the psychological and philosophical consequences of finding oneself in someone else's body. Doing so will presumably help one appreciate the Buddhist *anātman* theory—that, on close inspection, the "self" turns out to be an empty signifier, and that the misguided belief in a self arises from our tendency to project a self onto what is in fact a temporally discrete but causally

[14] The best known version of the story is found in the twelfth book of the *Kathāsaritsāgara* compiled by Somadeva in the eleventh century; see the translation in Tawney (1880–84: 2:261–264). The tale was borrowed by Thomas Mann for his 1940 novella "Die vertauschten Köpfe." Mann's story, which is set in India, is dedicated to the Indologist Heinrich Zimmer, through whose writings Mann was introduced to the tale. The head-swapping story then returns to India via the play *Hayavadana* (1971) by the contemporary South Indian playwright Girish Karnad, who knew the story through Mann's adaptation (Mahadevan 2002). Thanks to Phyllis Granoff for this reference.

connected sequence of cognitive events that have no *necessary* relationship with any particular material form.

In short, the image of a person's body being replaced piecemeal with that of a corpse is intended to undermine my sense of who and what I am by showing the degree to which my sense of myself as a perduring agent is rooted in my identification with my body. In this sense it recalls the use of teleportation and brain-transplants in contemporary philosophical debates over self identity.[15] But there is a key difference: both the teleporter and brain-transplant scenarios presume a close connection between mind and brain; the conceit is that the brain that is replicated or transplanted will continue to serve as physical support for the self, and this is what generates the quandary.[16] For medieval Buddhists, however, neither the brain nor any other part of the physical body serves as the singular seat of consciousness, so pondering teleportation or a brain transplant would not elicit the intended effect. Buddhist Ābhidharmika metaphysics is closer to dual-substance ontology, wherein the mental continuum is ontologically distinct from, but (at least in the case of beings in the desire and form realms) still associated with, a material body. Mind or consciousness can and does move in toto from one body to another, as happens at death. (Even in the case of those Buddhists, such as the Sarvāstivāda, who believe in an "intermediate existence" [*antarābhava*] between death and rebirth, a subtle material [*rūpa*] body is still required during the interregnum; see Kritzer 2000.) How then might an Ābhidharmika induce the conceptual vertigo that we experience when we contemplate a brain transplant or teleportation? The tale of the vain novice provided the answer: the body-swap could be effected *piecemeal*. Following the lead of the Upagupta version, the author of the *Da zhidu lun* has the body transformed one bit at a time, such that the *spacial locus* of self-identity remains in place while everything around it changes. In this sense, the physicalism presumed in the corpse-man tale differs from that in the brain-transplant and teleportation scenarios, in which the continuity of one's mental stream is integrally tied to the structural or isomorphic continuity of a physical substrate.

[15] The use of teleportation in philosophical discussions of identity became popular following the discussion in Parfit (1984: 197 ff.), although he was not the first to come up with the idea. In Parfit's version, a person travels to Mars via a machine on Earth that scans the traveler's atomic makeup and relays the information to a machine on Mars that instantly produces an exact replica. Meanwhile, back on Earth, the scanner kills the original person. There are many variants, including ones in which the original is not killed. (Extended discussions of Parfit's theory can be found in the chapters by Coseru and Ganeri in this volume.) See also Daniel Dennett (1978), who relates an amusing tale in which his brain is removed from his body and placed in a vat; his brain remains connected to his body via radio transmitters, but when his original body is accidentally destroyed it is replaced with that of another.

[16] The conceptual quandary is akin to that explored in the "rubber-hand illusion" (Botvinick and Cohen 1998; Tsakiris and Haggard 2005), and "full-body illusion" (Lenggenhager et al. 2007; Blanke and Metzinger 2009). In both cases, a clever experimental setup is used to induce subjects to identify or locate themselves within a surrogate body (or body part) that lies at some remove from their physical bodies.

The success of a thought experiment depends on how cleverly it draws upon our metaphysical intuitions—the very point of the experiment is to expose such intuitions to considered refection and analysis. We may be unclear about how a neurosurgeon would go about a brain transplant or how a teleporter actually works, and medieval Buddhist monks may have been equally fuzzy about how a demon would go about grafting a limb. In each case the audience might be skeptical that such a feat is even possible. But that is beside the point. The goal is to elicit the philosophical astonishment that results from imagining oneself in the body of another. (Consider Śāriputra's bewilderment upon finding himself suddenly in the body of a goddess in Chapter 6 of the *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa*.)

Judging from its inclusion in later anthologies, the *Da zhidu lun* body-swap tale appears to have been effective. It is included in the *Zhongjing zhuanza piyu* 眾經撰雜譬喻 (*Miscellany of Parables from the Scriptures*), a short two-fascicle work containing forty-seven stories compiled by Dao Lüe 道略 in the early fifth century.[17] The corpse-man tale also appears in a later compilation, the *Jinglu yixiang* 經律異相 by Sengmin 僧旻, Baochang 寶唱, et al., completed in 516. This is a collection of miracle stories culled from the scriptures intended to attest to the power of Buddhism, and the authors explicitly mention the *Da zhidu lun* and *Ayuwang jing* as their sources for the versions of the corpse-man tale that appear therein.[18]

Whatever its popularity, it is not clear that the corpse-man tale is an effective response to the Nyāya critique. Nor is it likely to convince Zahavi. The man who finds himself in someone's else's body may be confused, but Zahavi could respond that the confusion is still *his*. That is, there is still a *phenomenological* continuity—a distinct and singular point-of-view that survives the transformation from one body to the next. Indeed, Zahavi might insist that without presuming the existence of this inner "witness" the tale loses its evocative power. The Ābhidharmika will respond that the point of the tale is to expose this witness as an illusory construct, and that phenomenal appearances, however deeply rooted, are not to be trusted. Thought experiments like the corpse-man tale may not in themselves decide such issues, although they can help us tease out critical nuances, including the subtle ways in which Buddhist intuitions about mind-body duality differ from our own. But this is only possible once we recognize the tales for what they are: playful but philosophically compelling thought experiments well suited to survive the journey across vast temporal and cultural distances.

Acknowledgements Earlier versions of this paper were delivered at the Institut für Indologie und Tibetologie, ~~Ear~~Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München (May 16-18, 2012), at the K.J. Somaiya Centre For Buddhist Studies, University of Mumbai (7th Biennial International Conference on "Cross-Cultural Transmission of Buddhist Texts: Translation, Transliteration and Critical Edition," December 5-7, 2012), and at National Taiwan University, Taipei (5th International Sheng Yen

[17] T.208: 4.531c25-532a17; cf. Chavannes (1911: 72–74). Little is known about this collection or its compiler, but it is based on materials translated by Kumārajīva. See the discussions in Chavannes (1911: 1–3); Sugiyama (1992); and Yost (2013).

[18] T.2121: 53.92c22-93a5 and 241a23-b9.

Education Foundation Conference, June 29, 2014). I would like to thank the organizers of those events, as well as Christian Coseru, Phyllis Granoff, Sean Kerr, Nir Feinberg, Alexander von Rospatt, Elizabeth Horton Sharf, and Evan Thompson for their invaluable comments and suggestions.

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