

As if

Let us stop and examine our lives for a moment. What can we really know about ourselves? We know that we are experiencing something. We are reading (seeing) this passage. We can hear some sounds from not too far away. We might smell toast burning, or hear the kettle whistling. Or, we might feel the cold or the heat. Thus far we can usually be quite sure of things.

But when a thought comes to our minds, it often leads to a thousand other thoughts: this is called mental proliferation. Whenever we think or imagine or fantasize in this way, we are either delving into the past, or projecting into the future. In either case, none of the thoughts are real: they are not the present moment. They are “as if ...”

In fact, other than our immediate physical sense-experiences that we are directly aware of, we generally live in a self-made or projected world of “as if.” Take a common example of knowing someone: we think we know this person so well, but then something this person has said or done simply shocks or disillusion us, making us realize that we have misperceived him or her.

Our level of shock or disappointment is proportional to the confidence or faith in our perception of that person. The point is that we can never be sure. We tend to have a permanent or fixed view of people. If we think someone is bad, he is forever bad; he cannot change. If we *think* someone is good, we are likely to take him to be more than what he really is. We perceive an “as if” image of him.

The same works for ourselves. We tend to have a certain self-view. Self-views limit and imprison us. A self-view is like a photo of a free flying bird suddenly frozen into pixels of colours, or a series of “moving” images. (There is really nothing moving in a “movie.”) No matter how beautiful the picture or movie is, it is *not* the bird. No matter how beautiful a picture of a sunset may be, it is still not the sunset. The picture is not the thing. You are not a self-view.

Our ideas limit us when we do not know how to let go of them. But they liberate us when we are able to understand things better. Ideas are tools to help us think better; they are not permanent things to cling to. A mind burdened with fixed ideas and opinions will be crushed under its own dead weight.

Now let us apply this “as if” framework to religion, one of the most speculative areas of human life. If we are religious, we are often likely to believe in what we can neither see nor experience directly with our senses. The key ideas of religion—such as God, soul, devil, ghost—can only be “known” within our minds. At best, we can only CLAIM to have seen any of them, or say that someone claims to know about them. But none of us can be too sure about any of this.

Now let us develop this idea further in a positive way. Remember when we were kids, we played “as if” games, and remember how happy we were then. In a sense, as long as we are unawakened, we are still spiritually children. So, what if we go on playing the “as if” game, but on a more mature level: the results would be most enlightening.

Most people who do not care about religion tend to think that this is our only life. As such, they argue, we might as well gather rose-buds while we may. Eat, drink and be merry: for, today we live, tomorrow we die.

But I think such a life-view is likely to unleash our shadows, the elements of our dark side. Such people might then feel the urgency to enjoy life (“find happiness”) to the maximum right now at any cost. So we have priests who vowed poverty but earn \$18,000 a month (priests with money are likely to enjoy what non-priests would),¹ and lawyers who run away with their client’s millions—to give two well known examples in Singapore today.

What such materialists (a technical name for such make-the-best-of-this-one-life believers) may not realize is that life is actually much shorter than that! Life is really just a MOMENT. By the time I have completed this reflection, I am a very different person. Of course, this is not very noticeable, because my mind will then be occupied with other pressing matters.

But just sit back for a while, and look back to when you were much younger (say 10 years ago, or even just before reading this reflection). You have a certain life-view or opinion, but now you have changed that view. In fact, we create and revise our views more often than we realize. But a powerful voice in our heads keeps dictating to us that only a certain view is right. (This is the voice of the past.)

What does all this mean for me? As I have said at the beginning: we live in an “as if” world. However, unlike the materialists, I am not sure if this is my one and only life. Whenever I look at the trees and nature I am reminded that life is a cycle, an endlessly turning wheel. Plants produce seeds, from which new plants grow.

Suppose my actions are like seeds (like seeds producing like plants). Then, my actions will bear fruits; my actions have consequences which I will feel for myself, sooner or later. If seeds can produce plants, surely a conscious being like myself would continue to generate myself.²

For, I am not just body, but I am also mind. In fact, it is my mind that has thought out this reflection and making my body (the fingers) type it out. Surely, the mind is powerful enough to survive this body, which has a limited shelf-life. This is called rebirth in Buddhism.

I prefer this “as if” life-view rather than the “one and only life” view because I think that a life guided by karma and rebirth is more likely to explain why it is better to be good than be evil. We can then see that our lives are made up of actions and their consequences.

I don’t think I can say the last word on such a reflection as you have your own life. All I can now say is: keep reflecting on this, and let your still clear mind speak to you. I think you will in time hear the same voice I hear, which says:

“This mortal life is but an intermediate state of consciousness.” (Brahma, vihara Sutta, A 10.208.2)³

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¹ See Mani,culaka Sutta (S 42.10.8) = SD 4.21 & “Money and Monastics” = SD 4.19-23. See:

² Here is an interesting recent report on rebirth recollection: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=72oCyrbgN_I.

³ <http://dharmafarer.googlepages.com/2.10BrahmaviharaSa10.208piya.pdf> .