

## Dąbrowski's Critique of Asian Religions

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Dąbrowski makes a number of criticisms of Hinduism and Buddhism. For example in a work entitled *In search of mental health*,<sup>1</sup> he says that Eastern religions force a fixed hierarchy of values upon individuals rather than allowing them to discover their own unique hierarchy of values.

In the area of development of our individuality, empathy, responsibility for our own development, our goals and strivings, Eastern religious systems put us under pressure and force upon us strange views, a foreign sense of life, strange forms of love and development, and a strange hierarchy of values. Such transcendence is a construction reminding us of an authoritative, absolutist rule of bloody despots, fixed on their own vague visions. It is not we who create these values, nor we who evaluate the most appropriate for us hierarchies. They are forced upon us, without our participation and choice. In this manner, we are treated like slaves by "the higher powers." (1996: somewhere in pp.155-158)

Specifically Zen Buddhism is criticized because it is anti-intellectual and its teachings are vague and imprecise.

Zen systems are vague; they promote rejection of rationality, analysis, discussion and endorse waiting for some mystical resolutions, which in their pure intuitiveness contradict the higher human nature, contradict its new creative structure (feelings, desires and intellect). They offer us a cosmos of imprecise images, visions of unaware existences, consoling us that we will understand these existences "later." (1996: somewhere in pp.155-158)

But at the core of Dąbrowski's critique of Hindu and Buddhist views of the world is the charge that they are monistic, i.e., that they describe the highest human attainment as a permanent obliteration of one's individual self through a merger with a larger whole.

Presenting, by Buddhism, the highest principle as the moral law, telling us about becoming one (with God) and the necessary obliteration of individual identity, with the simultaneous sentencing a man to a senseless, ever higher differentiation of feelings and consciousness only to cut their roots and turn man as an individual into nothingness, is promoting the fundamental moral evil and crime against humanity. Hindu monistic systems, which reject (the survival of) the "small personality" (Radhakrishnan, Vivekananda) while showing the human race the agony of reincarnation, acquiring the subtlest and most individual personality; and which then, against the developmental hierarchy, sentence it to existence united with God, and so to non-existence – are a dark grotesque, dressed up in verbal excesses. (1996: somewhere in pp.155-158)

Dąbrowski's concern about monism is not restricted to a few pages of his yet untranslated book entitled, *In search of mental health*. It can be found also throughout his other writings. Put in a nutshell, Dąbrowski sees monistic religious systems as teaching that individuality will eventually be obliterated in a permanent union with ultimate reality, thus denying the unique, unrepeatable and enduring nature of the individual and of human relationships. Before examining in detail the reasons for Dąbrowski's concerns about monism, I would like to point out a few facts which will nuance what Dąbrowski has said about Asian religions. First, Dąbrowski does not object to mystical experiences in which individual identity is *temporarily* lost. Second, Dąbrowski's critique of Asian religion is not absolute—several practitioners of Hinduism and Buddhism are presented as examples of advanced development. Third, Dąbrowski does not limit his critique to Asian religions alone. And fourth, Dąbrowski allows that it is not only possible, but even likely, that many persons at the level of organized multilevel disintegration will hold monist views.

### **>Individual identity may be temporarily lost in mystical experiences**

It is important not to interpret Dąbrowski's remarks on monism as a rejection of those mystical experiences in which the awareness of individual existence is *temporarily* extinguished. In a passage critical of monism, Dąbrowski makes it clear that his criticism does not apply to temporary states of identity loss:

Delight, empathy toward another, toward a work of art, toward the object of love disappear, [without consciousness of one's separateness] ...We are not talking here about a temporary loss of one's sense of identity, which makes sense only if it is preceded and followed by states of awareness of one's identity and uniqueness. (1996: somewhere in pp.125-127)

Therefore Dąbrowski's comments on monism cannot be interpreted as a rejection of the kind of experience reported by the Hindu swami Satchidananda, while on a pilgrimage to Mount Kailash in 1958:

We had climbed to a height of approximately 13,000 feet when we pitched our camp ... After light evening meal, we retired for the night.

As it turned out, I only spent a few minutes in bed. Some unknown force kindled me from within. I suddenly became aware of a pleasant feeling, both within and without, that words cannot express. Reluctant to stay in the tent, I put on a woolen shawl and left for the shore of the lake. There I sat in meditation. What calmness! What peace! What joy! The Lord blessed me with the wonderful bliss of sleep with consciousness [i.e., an experience of samadhi]. I lost myself in that bliss.

I did not realize how much time had passed until the first brilliant rays of morning sunlight reflected off the glaciers, piercing my eyelids. The inner light gradually sank back into the heart, while the eyes became alive to the outer light. The mind, still immersed in the joy of the inner light, made the eyes gently close their lids once more. This gentle tug back and forth between the inner light and the outer light went on for some time. The ears, which had only heard the inner sound of OM in that blissful state, now became aware of the heavy movements of men and mules. Little by little I became conscious of the outer world. But even while moving about in the world, that bliss within -- once experienced -- is never to be forgotten. (Satchidananda, 1984:47-48)

The swami's remark that the experience of union with the divine, once experienced, is never forgotten seems to parallel Dąbrowski's description of religion at level V, in which he says that temporary union with God eventually results in a dual awareness of an ongoing union with God along with a simultaneous awareness of one's individual existence:

Active love resulting from experiences gained in meditation and contemplation... Union > with God is experienced in meditation or in strong intuitive projections, leading to an inner understanding of God, the so-called infused knowledge. The deepest respect and love of God do not obliterate the awareness of one's individuality. *This means that the sense of affinity and union with God exists together with preservation of distinct and permanent individual essence* [emphasis mine]. (1977:217)

### **Individual practitioners of Asian religion as examples of advanced development**

In his discussion of the discipline of psychology at different levels, Dąbrowski suggests that the teachings of Hindu sages like Sri Aurobindo and Ramakrishna are, along with those of Christian saints like Teresa of Avila and Gregory the Great, examples of level V psychological thinking (1977:208).

Ramakrishna is also considered to be, along with Francis of Assisi, an example of positive infantilism at level V. Of them Dąbrowski says,

... such individuals as Saint Francis of Assisi or Ramakrishna combine childlike nature with the highest level of development, guided only by their personality ideal—[which] for Saint Francis is represented by Christ, [and] for Ramakrishna by [the] Divine Mother Kali. (1977:203)

Speaking of courage that occurs in cases of higher level existential anxiety in *Psychoneurosis is not an illness*, Dąbrowski cites Kierkegaard and the Buddha as examples:

There is a strong concurrence of the experiences of courage, heroism, humility, fear of the unknown and the decision that one must enter the unknown, as in the case of Buddha or Kierkegaard. (1972a:200)

The fasting of Gandhi and the Vietnamese Buddhist monks (and the self-immolation of the Vietnamese Buddhist monks) are held up as examples of frustration (in the form of moral protest) at level V (1977:166).

Dąbrowski, in an account of psychiatry at level V, cites yoga as an expression of the dynamism of self-education:

[At level V] Instead of treatment, there is education. The goal for the client is to become capable of education-of-himself. Various systems and disciplines of yoga and self-perfection based on moral and spiritual principles have this character. (1977:211)

For a balanced picture of Dąbrowski's position on Asian religions, it is necessary to take into account his positive assessment of individual Hindus and Buddhists and religious practices like yoga as well as his rather strongly expressed reservations regarding the dangers of Asian monism. It is also necessary to realize that Dąbrowski's critique of religious views is not limited to the religions of Asia.

### **Dąbrowski's critique not limited to Asian religions**

Dąbrowski is as critical of Christian theologians, such as Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, and of Catholic mystics such as John of the Cross and Thérèse of Lisieux, as he is of Asian religions. A

passage from *In search of mental health* >succinctly states Dąbrowski's objections to Thomism:

St. Thomas in his theology invalidates individual personality, since he dismisses feelings which are essentially human, and entangles us in ways of abstract thought, ways of reason, which exclude and reject all, even the most spiritual individual structures. He creates a vision of "union with God," with a complete absorption by the deity. (1996:within 155-158)

And in *Fragments from the diary of a madman* Dąbrowski accuses Aquinas of rejecting the value of emotional love between humans:

According to St. Thomas ' theology there is no place for differentiated love of partners, there is no place for love from both sides. If love is, it is an "intellectual" one; if will is—it is independent from feelings and is intellectualized. (1972c:50)

Dąbrowski also finds fault with the view of God presented by both Aquinas and Augustine, judging it to be at a primitive level of understanding.

In the history of ideas and human experiences concerned with God, we can differentiate three images and ideas of God: [1] an all-powerful lord; [2] a strong and upright being[;] and [3] a God of love. These three phases of God go hand in hand with our hierarchy of reality, with our image of the ideal.

The first idea of God was and is most primitive. The last is perhaps the highest level of development and is represented by many ideals in different religions ...

Alas there still exists the first idea of God. We can see it in St. Augustine 's lesson about salvation and condemnation of people. We can see it in St. Thomas ' picture of God as a pure intellect and where the approach to him is intellectual, an approach which rejects and atrophies emotional attitudes. (1972c:50)

To this day Thomas Aquinas remains the dominant theologian in the curriculum of Catholic seminaries and Augustine is a seminal figure not only for the Catholic theological tradition but also for the Evangelical (or Lutheran) and the Reformed (or Calvinist) traditions. So Dąbrowski's objection to Thomist and Augustinian theological conceptions is no small matter. Neither is the criticism he makes of John of the Cross, a man that most informed Catholics regard as one of the most important theorists in the history of Catholic mystical theology. Of John of the Cross, Dąbrowski says the following in *Fragments from the diary of a madman*

... St. John of the Cross ... elaborates the love of God and destroys the differentiated love of a man; he curtails the right for us to possess exclusive feelings for friends and people close to us. Everything should be given to God; he is rapacious, all-powerful and cannot stand exclusive emotional relations between people.

How contradictory it is to Christ's concept that the highest commandment is "love thy neighbour." God becomes here an all-powerful, jealous tyrant who demands obedience and which—as a matter of fact—is not interested in the world. And, again, St. John of the Cross compensated for this one-sided idea about God in his poetic and mystical work [which are] full of sensuality. (1972c:50-51)

Thérèse > of Lisieux is the most popular mystical saint in the modern Catholic church. Dąbrowski considers that the feelings she expressed for God, and which form the basis for her remarkable popularity with modern Catholics, were a perversion of a desire to experience an exclusive [human] love which she was not allowed to experience. Here are Dąbrowski's own words:

Mistaking elements of love for others [can lead] ... to an almost compensated perversion of feelings for God and Christ. We can especially see it in such saints as Thérèse of Lisieux who experiences the having of a small Christ in her, or the ceremony of getting married to him, calling [him] husband, and so on.

It is—perhaps—a distorted expression of love for God; it is an imposition of exclusiveness of love for him [to] whom everything belongs and [for] whom it is necessary to reject everything [else] which, even though it [may be] ... highly spiritual, is not directed exclusively toward God.

It is a distorted expression of the sublimation of one's own primitive egoism, transferring to God the fanatical desire for exclusive love, impossible to express humanly.

There appears, subdued, everything which is perverse even to sexual dreams about God, even to the feeling of having him in the womb, and in the maternal attitude. (1972c:50-51)

Dąbrowski's knowledge of Judaism seems to have been restricted to the existentialist thought of Martin Buber, but had he been familiar with the writings of Moses Maimonides, rooted as they are in Aristotelianism, or of the neoplatonic mysticism of Kabbalah, he would have been as critical of these traditions as he was of their Christian counterparts. The point to be made here is simply that Dąbrowski's criticisms of religious thought are in no way uniquely directed toward the Asian religious traditions. Furthermore, in spite of his very strong feelings about Asian monism, he admits that such views can be held at a relatively high level of personality.

## Level IV monism

While Dąbrowski strongly disapproves of the monist philosophical position, in a discussion of philosophy at level IV, he grants that a monist view could be entertained at the level of organization of multilevel disintegration, although not beyond this level.

Two directions of philosophy emerge as most characteristic for this level: monistic (in the sense of accepting total identification with the first cause, the principle of being, or the highest being) and essential (in the sense of accepting individual essence as having indestructible existence not to be dissolved in ultimate oneness). [But there will be a] Gradual transition toward the orientation of individual essence. (1977:215)

At this point, in order to better understand why Dąbrowski finds monism so abhorrent, we need to look at his view of the individual, of human relationships, of immortality and of the relationship between individual humans and ultimate reality.

### Dąbrowski's view of the individual

For Dąbrowski each person possesses a unique, authentic and eternal essence as he says in *Existential thoughts and aphorisms*:

There is no true human existence without genuine essence. The condition of a truly human existence is awareness of and choice of what is quintessential, unique and enduring in a man, without which existence itself would be valueless. (1972b:11)

In *Fragments from the diary of a madman*, Dąbrowski explains that individual essence is emotional and eternal, and it includes unique interests and talents.

If I am an individual, I have needs for identification, development and empathy, if I want to be unique, unrepeatable, if I want the same for others—that is to say, I want to see them as separate and unrepeatable—my essence must be emotional.

I desire lasting friendship and unrepeatable, unique feelings; I want to have deep interests. The same talents I now have, in my more or less infantile longing, I want to keep in transcendental life.

Essence is a value which I would not renounce because it determines the meaning of my life. Should I have to choose between existence without it and nonexistence, I would choose the second. It is emotional essence which gives the meaning to existence. (1972c:72-73)

On the one hand, the basic essence of the person seems to be a given, if not from birth, at least from very early in life. This can be seen by the fact that in the passage just cited, Dąbrowski associates individual essence with “deep interests” and “talents,” and elsewhere he makes it clear that such interests and talents manifest very early in life:

Developmental potential can also be observed in children in connection with strong special interests and abilities ... Some children show early mathematical abilities ....

There is a great number of children who at age of 4-6 write poetry distinguished by deep content and good form. (1972a:8)

On the other hand, an authentic human nature is an acquisition attained through effort:

We cannot regard authenticism as a gift acquired without work, effort, self-transformation and self-education. Authenticism is acquired through deep and grave life experiences, inner conflicts and unceasing efforts. Therefore, the methods or aids in planning development and self-education must be based on authentic values, placed in our hierarchy of values, progressing from the lowest to the highest level of authenticism.

To become authentic—in the sense of becoming a unique human individual with an unrepeatable, autonomously developed social attitude—must be considered one of the fundamental elements of our ideal of personality... (1973:93-94)

In other words a person's unique, eternal emotional essence is discovered through the process of positive disintegration and positive secondary integration. Given this understanding of human individuality, it is clear that whatever might threaten it's existence is a cause for alarm. Going hand in hand with his understanding of human individual essence is Dąbrowski's understanding of unique unrepeatable relationships with significant others.

### **Persistent exclusivity of friendships and relationships in this world and the next**

As one might expect, for Dąbrowski, friendships and relationships are expressive of the developmental level of those involved. So, for example, higher level relationships are characterized by empathy and the goal of mutual encouragement of personality development. They are considered unique and unrepeatable—i.e., not replaceable. Of emotional ties at level IV, Dąbrowski says.

Love and friendship take on a spiritual character with common goal of self-perfection. The action of the dynamisms of organized multilevel disintegration, in particular the dynamisms of



identification and empathy, constitutes the basis of conscious design of a developmental program in relation to exclusive feelings. Emotional ties are more deeply than ever before understood as unique and unrepeatable. (1977:169)

A cardinal feature of friendships and relationships is that they are "exclusive." This is explicitly stated by Dąbrowski in his description of emotional ties at level III:

Emotional ties become more exclusive. There is a distinct need for stability which is realized according to some general developmental program of the individual. The relationships of love, friendship, family are exclusive or almost exclusive. (1977:169)

Not only are emotional ties exclusive, they are also long-lasting. Dąbrowski, speaking of higher level feelings within a marriage says that,

...ideal love with strong individual feeling, and exclusive and unchangeable emotional attachment, even in conditions of fading or loss of the partner's attractive physical features. (1973:122)

But in Dąbrowski's view this exclusive endurance of feeling is not limited to the period when both persons involved are alive. Authentic emotional ties survive the death of one of the partners and the relationship remains an exclusive one, as can be seen from the following passage from *The dynamics of concepts*:

In some individuals exclusiveness in love is not weakened, although the partners grow older. Love does not disappear, even after the death of one of the partners. Although the survivor is still capable of sexual life, he does not remarry and maintains exclusive feelings. (1973:131)

For Dąbrowski, fidelity to a relationship does not end with the grave but continues even after the partner has died. Furthermore, if the surviving spouse is at a higher level, he or she will not remarry. This same opinion is expressed in the form of a lament in *Existential thoughts and aphorisms*:

Love, alas, does not pass beyond the grave; it chooses objects of this world. What is the meaning of eternal individual love? He whose comprehension of these matters is different, is always the loser in competition with the living. (1972b:11)

Persistent exclusivity is not, in Dąbrowski's view, limited to marital or romantic relationships. In *Fragments from a diary of a madman*, Dąbrowski reflects, in a very personal way, on the persistent exclusivity of friendship at a higher level. Again this reflection takes the form of a lament:

I had need of emotional exclusiveness.

I was terribly disappointed many times. Those to whom I gave my confidence and generosity were not sincere toward me. My best advice was told to others who did not deserve even a part of my "friend's" confidence.

This easy and superficial "replacement" of confidence is the same as unfaithfulness in marriage, it is like the marriage of a widow with an enemy of her dead husband. It is like the transition from marriage or friendship with a truly great man to marriage or friendship with a smaller man. For example, Hamlet's mother went from the dignity of one marriage to the grotesqueness of another.

Lack of exclusiveness, faithfulness, uniqueness; lack of constant relationship, lack of sincerity among friends. I prefer schizophrenic worlds. (1972c:54-55)

In a passage in *Existential thoughts and aphorisms*, Dąbrowski not only emphasizes post-mortem fidelity for a meaningful friendship, but even recommends not ever again having such a relationship:

One should remember a close and deceased person as a fresh flower and living wound, but not only this ... one should live with him as with a person, at least in thought, imagination and longing; one should create his transcendental form, and if possible—never again have such a close relationship. (1972b:28)

Thus in Dąbrowski's view, a person functioning at a higher level will be guided by a moral imperative to remain faithful to a deceased spouse. But this inclination can be felt in an even more concrete way. Higher level persons will even lose their ability to function sexually in the absence of their spouse. This is made clear in Dąbrowski's description of sexual behaviour at level III:

[At level III] Exclusivity and stability of feelings begin to manifest strongly, as well as responsibility for the partner and the family. In sexual life, emotional components prevail over physical. [The] Sexual instinct gradually loses its character of a biological species drive and becomes an instinct with an expression individually human. The predominance of emotional over physical attachment finds its expression particularly in the need for exclusivity. Exclusive attachments lead to strong sexual inhibition, even impotence, when the partner leaves or dies. For example, in my clinical practice, I met a forty-year old man, father of seven children, who became impotent after his wife left him. His impotence lasted several years until the time when his wife returned to him. This is an example of an inhibition of the lower level of an instinct (biological level of sexual drive) by a higher level of the same instinct (emotional and exclusive attachment)." (1977:79)

If, at higher levels of functioning, there is a tendency to think of relationships as persisting beyond the grave, then it would follow logically that such individuals might spend some of their time reflecting on post-mortem survival. This Dąbrowski claims, in his account of immortality at level IV, is exactly what happens:

There is [in persons at level IV an] equal or even stronger interest in the survival of others than [in] one's own. The subject of survival after death is studied and given much thought, particularly the question of those essential qualities which survive. There is a balance between common essence and individual essence. Love and friendship transcend death. (1977:141)

Dąbrowski proposes, that for some persons at an advanced stage of development, there may even be a willingness to put off until the next world, the actualizing of a relationship which exists in this life only in potential. He cites as an example the case of Soren Kirkegaard and Regina Olsen.

[At the level of secondary integration] The individual experiences and realizes eternal relationships. For example, Kierkegaard, in order to preserve the absolute and the ideal aspect of his relationship with Regina, made her believe that he was a scoundrel and was merely playing with her emotions. In this manner, he made her free of her attachment to him. Kierkegaard believed that their union, impossible on earth, was possible in the absolute. (1977:169-170)

In Dąbrowski's view, not only is immortality necessary if exclusive, unique and unrepeatable relationships are to persist, but because there is a need for immortality, there must therefore be such an immortality. This argument can be found in a passage from *In search of mental health*:

To what conclusions do these thoughts lead us? The structure and strength of an individual essence, and so, among other things, lasting, unique, exclusive love and friendship do not have to fall apart, if there is any meaning to our existence. Otherwise the highest teachings about the supremacy of love, of the utmost importance of friendship and love, would be just empty phrases. (1996: somewhere in pp.135-137)

If there were no immortality, it would not be possible to have the kind of relationships which are characteristic of persons at higher levels of functioning. Or to put it more precisely, an essential requirement of those relationships—i.e., persistence—would not be possible. But for Dąbrowski, not every type of immortality will meet the requirements of higher level relationships. It must be an immortality in which individuals preserve their unique essences. To understand this better we need now to look at Dąbrowski's understanding of the proper relationship between individuals and ultimate reality, or God.

## Dąbrowski's view of the relationship with the Absolute

Dąbrowski's point of departure is his understanding of the unique nature of the human person and of human relationships. For Dąbrowski both authentic individual existence and authentic human relationships would be compromised if there were no post-mortem continuity, or if that continuity consisted in some form of obliteration of individual identity in a union with the Absolute. This is the reason for Dąbrowski's unequivocal rejection of any form of monism, whether it be found in the east or in the west. Dąbrowski's protest against the monistic interpretation of the universe is expressed in somewhat passionate terms in the following passage from *In Search of mental health*:

If ... [monistic] systems in any way reflect reality, then, in the name of human dignity, we cannot accept them. We should protest against them through our own moral criteria, our empathy, love, our own sense of justice. These systems supposedly show some elements of knowledge, express some kind of love. In fact, they do not represent any knowledge or love. (1996: somewhere in pp.155-158)

Not only would any view that sees the ultimate human goal as a permanent dissolution of the self in a sea of divinity be quite unacceptable, the development of personality requires that individuals not identify with anything outside of themselves. In *The dynamics of concepts*, Dąbrowski puts it as follows:

Why do we speak on this level about global identification with oneself and not others—I think that it is [the] only [thing] possible on this level, and it is positive in regard to oneself and the ideal of personality. We can have sympathy, love, high regard for others or we can fraternize with others, but we can't identify with them. It may be possible for a short period of time. Global permanent identification with others would, not only be profitless, but destructive of our and other's identity.

We can have love and worship even for god, but we can't aspire to identification with him because that is harmful for oneself. From a philosophical point of view the author presents a personalistic and anti-monistic attitude. (1973:84-85)

So what would a higher level relationship with God or the Absolute be like. Dąbrowski says that the religious attitude at level V would be characterized by,

Development of the relationship "I" and "Thou" in the sense of development of absolute religious values of faith together with all-encompassing empathy and universal love. The search for transcendental hierarchy in religious attitude finds expression in authentism and in idealization of personality. Such an attitude develops through an intuitive synthesis of one's own personal

relationship with the divinity. In this level, religious attitude is marked by clarity and simplicity which is nourished by great depth of religious experience. It is also characterized by an effort to make the relation between immanence and transcendence understandable, to make God a concrete experience, to carry on with Him a dialogue in place of his monologue. There may be breaks and interruptions in such a dialogue leading to the “dark night of the soul,” but the need and search for the dialogue remain intact and unassailable. (1977:143-144)

For Dąbrowski the type of relationship that Buber calls an I-Thou relationship is what characterizes religious experience at level V. Only this kind of relationship, he feels, will preserve the important achievements of someone who has arrived at an advanced level of personality. And only this kind of relationship will allow for the persistence of intimate friendships and relationships.

### **Dąbrowski's accusation that most Hindu and Buddhist schools are monists**

Dąbrowski is under the impression, and here we have to take into account, the nature of his sources, that most forms of Hinduism and Buddhism, and by implication, most Hindus and Buddhists are monists—i.e., that in one way or another they deny the eternal existence of an authentic individual essence.

Hindu and Buddhist philosophies, and esoteric systems, *most often* express monistic views. [emphasis mine] (1996: somewhere in pp.135-137)

Awareness of all that is important to us, exclusive and unrepeatable; and what is deep, authentic, inviolable in others; authentic awareness in others and oneself constitute this kind of consciousness which is the consciousness of one's personality and self-determination. *A majority* of Hindu, Buddhist, Zen, Tibetan, and even scholastic systems are opposed to this approach. [emphasis mine] (1996: somewhere in pp.125-127)

The fact of the matter is that most Hindus and Buddhists believe in a self that endures beyond the grave, as we shall now see.

#### **>Are most Hindus monists? >**

The Hindu philosophical tradition is a very rich one and includes a number of schools. Since the medieval period the most widespread (both in India and abroad) of these schools is the one known as Vedanta, about which the Hinduism scholar, Cybelle Shattuck, says the following:

Vedanta, [which means] the “end of the Vedas [the most ancient Hindu texts]” is the name given to the most influential philosophy from the medieval period. There are actually several distinct

schools within Vedanta, each with its own great teachers and doctrines. The core focus of these schools is the understanding of the relationship between Brahman [the supreme being] and *atman* [the soul]... (Shattuck, 1999:56)

The sub-system of Vedanta known as Advaita Vedanta (or non-dual Vedanta) is the one that Dąbrowski's stereotype of Hindu monism. Shattuck describes it as follows:

The Vedanta most familiar in the West is associated with Shankara (c. 788-820 C.E.) ... who ... described Brahman [or the supernatural] as non-dual. There is only one reality and that is Brahman. The individual *atman* [or soul] is identical to Brahman ... but people see themselves as distinct entities in a world of diverse forms because of *maya*, "illusion." When that illusion is pierced, one realizes that there is nothing but Brahman. The cycle of rebirth [i.e., reincarnation] ceases and, at death, the individual *atman* merges into Brahman. (Shattuck, 1999:56-58)

Shattuck explains that this form of Hindu monism was meant for a rather limited audience, i.e., Hindu monastics. Hindu lay persons are almost always dualists:

Shankara's system, which was not designed for householder life [but rather for monastics] and [which] demoted theistic devotion, is far less representative of majority Hinduism than the teachings of Ramanuja. Ramanuja (c. 1025-1137) utilized the theism of the medieval literature in his interpretation of the Vedanta texts to formulate the school known as Vishishta-advaita, "qualified non-dualism" [in which] ... the supreme Brahman is the personal Lord ... Brahman is the ground of existence, but individual souls and matter are eternally distinct parts of Brahman. So, although Brahman is everything, and therefore non-dual, that non-dualism is qualified by the distinct existence of souls and matter. (Shattuck, 1999:58)

This means that for the vast majority of Hindus,

... the world is real and souls retain their individuality even in [spiritual] liberation [i.e., in eternity] ... Ramanuja describes this devotion as self-surrender and constant contemplation of God. [And] This Brahman is a personal God [and] ... There must be a distinction between the soul and God to make [a] ... relationship possible. [For Ramanuja] ... the experience of the *atman* merging into the attributeless Brahman (which is the highest attainment of Advaita Vedanta) is a preliminary stage of purification before the self regains a sense of personal identity and passes on to attain a higher stage of permanent communion with the personal Lord. (Shattuck, 1999:58-59)

From Shattuck's remarks it would seem that ordinary Hindu lay persons, or householders, are non-monistic, whereas the Hindu monastics are monistic. In fact, however even the ascetics are not exclusively monistic—there are both non-monistic and monistic ascetics.

In a study of ascetics living in the city of Bhubaneswar (in the state of Orissa) David Miller lists the various mathas (or monasteries) to be found in that location (Miller, 1976: Table 18). Ten of the 22 mathas followed, at least nominally, the teachings of Shankara, the eighth-century founder of the best known form of Hindu monism. The other twelve, of the 22 monasteries, followed the teachings of Shankara's rivals (Ramanuja and Madhva). These statistics, if typical, would make it seem as if almost half of the Hindu ascetics are monistic in their beliefs. But the matter is somewhat more complex. In spite of belonging to a monistic religious order an ascetic usually engages in devotions to a personal god and at the same time encourages others to do so. Miller cites the case of an ascetic named Jagadananda who received lay initiation from a guru at the age of 17 years and then for ten years was torn between worldly life and a desire to experience *samadhi* [spiritual liberation]. Finally at the age of 27 he committed himself to the ascetical life by joining one of the monistic religious orders founded by Shankara (Miller, 1976:31). However in spite of this affiliation, Miller tells us that

Philosophically, Jagadananda was a syncretist and an eclectic. He believed that *karma yoga* [or Brahmanic ritual performance], *bhakti yoga* [devotion to personal deities], and *jñāna yoga* [the meditative study of monistic mystical texts] were equally important paths to the same goal. (Miller, 1976: 33)

Jagadananda's case is not atypical. In spite of belonging to a monistic religious order, an ascetic may personally understand, and teach others, that the way to relate to the supernatural is by entering into a (unique, unrepeatably and eternal) relationship with a personal deity—a relationship in which the worshipper does not lose his or her individual identity.

### >Are most Buddhists monists?

What Cybelle Shattuck has said about the majority of Hindus, is equally true of the majority of Buddhists. There are two major divisions of Buddhists. One of these is Theravada, found mostly in Sri Lanka, and the southeast Asian countries of Burma, Laos, Thailand and Cambodia, and through immigration (and to a lesser extent conversion) in many other parts of the world, such as North America. The second branch is Mahayana, found mainly in China, Vietnam, Korea and Japan, and once again as a result of immigration in many other parts of the world.

Both branches of Buddhism can be thought of as monistic, in the sense that Dąbrowski finds objectionable, because they have in common beliefs in impermanence, soullessness and the ultimate "emptiness" of existence. At least these concepts are part of the official teaching. It is a different matter altogether at the popular level.

In his classic study of Buddhism in a Burmese village, Melford Spiro found that there was not just one form of Buddhism but at least three forms. These could even be seen as three levels of Buddhism. The first level could be referred to as the material level, in which practitioners hope to be relieved of daily problems and have the needs of this world satisfied. The second level is *saṃsāra* in which adherents hope for a better rebirth. Spiro found that these two goals were the only ones that were relevant for the vast majority of Burmese Buddhists. Only a few forest monks had as their goal the immediate attainment of nirvana, in which the illusion of a permanent self would be overcome. Spiro found that while the non-self doctrine was held by forest monks, this was not the case for the majority of Burmese Buddhists, who are anticipating a happier rebirth.

Burmans ... not only reject the concept of nonself, but many of them, including the most knowledgeable Buddhists in Yeigyi [the village where Spiro did his field work] do not even know its meaning. (Spiro, 1970:84-85)

For most Burmese concerned with merit and karma, the belief in a permanent ego which survives the death of the body is both a psychological necessity and a moral imperative. The psychological necessity follows from their hope to achieve a better and avoid an unpleasant rebirth. Without the notion of a permanent ego persisting from one rebirth to the next, this hope (so they argue) would be irrelevant, the belief in karma would lose its motivational significance, and behavior would lose its religious (Buddhist) underpinning. (Spiro, 1970:86)

The same distinction that Spiro found among Theravada Buddhists can also be found in the Mahayana school. This branch of Buddhism is made up primarily of two sects—i.e., Ch'an and Ching-t'u. The first is better known in the west as Zen (which simply means meditation) and is the form of Mahayana Buddhism practised by monks and nuns. The second sect, Ching-t'u, or Pure Land, is the form of Mahayana Buddhism practised by the overwhelming majority of Chinese, Vietnamese, Korean and Japanese Buddhists. The goal of Pure Land Buddhists is, at the end of their lives, to enter (as unique individual souls) into a heavenly realm where they will live in relationship with O-mi-to-fo, the heavenly Buddha.

At the popular level then, the majority of Hindus and Buddhists think more or less along the lines of Dąbrowski. They expect to survive as unique, unrepeatable selves, eventually enjoying an eternal relationship to the supernatural conceived of in anthropomorphic terms, or in the case of the Theravadin Buddhists, they look forward to a better future life on earth. However, even if most Hindus and Buddhists see themselves as having a continued existence in a manner that is not in striking opposition to Dąbrowski's understanding of immortality, what of the many sophisticated and highly regarded representatives of those traditions who espouse views that do appear to be what Dąbrowski refers to as "monistic." This is especially true of Buddhism, with its doctrines of



impermanence, soullessness and ultimate emptiness. Time does not permit a detailed (and adequate) presentation of Buddhist teaching on these topics, but perhaps a few words can be said about one of them—namely the Buddhist view of the self. At a purely literal level it would seem that Dąbrowski's ideal of a real, unique, enduring individual essence is completely opposed by the Buddhist notion of anatman or soullessness. However I believe that when we look more closely at the matter, the opposition is not so obvious.

### >Buddhist selflessness and the theory of positive disintegration

It is essential to realize that when Buddhists speak of selflessness, they are not referring to what Dąbrowski calls the individual's unique, unrepeatable essence. Rather when they refer to the illusion of a permanent self, they have in mind the various senses of self which Dąbrowski calls lower level drives, impulses, wills or centers. For Dąbrowski the true individual essence is found only in the personality ideal and in Buddhist teaching there is an equivalent, which is referred to as one's true nature or one's Buddha nature.

The source on the Buddhist notion of selflessness and Buddha nature that I will cite here is a North American named Jack Kornfield. Kornfield spent many years in Sri Lanka and southeast Asia practicing meditation and learning from well-respected Buddhist teachers. Unlike most of Dąbrowski's sources on Asian religion, he is both a scholar and a serious practitioner. In *A path with heart*, Kornfield provides his readers with the following description of the Buddhist doctrine of selflessness:

... the Buddha ... described us as a collection of five changing processes: the process of the physical body, of feelings, of perceptions, of responses, and of the flow of consciousness that experiences them all. Our sense of self arises whenever we grasp at or identify with these patterns. The process of identification, of selecting patterns to call "I," "me," "myself," is subtle and usually hidden from our awareness. We can identify with our body, feelings, or thoughts; we can identify with images, patterns, roles, and archetypes. Thus ... we might fix and identify with the role of being a woman or a man, a parent or a child ... Sometimes we identify with our desires: sexual, aesthetic, or spiritual ... We can choose the archetype of hero, lover, mother, ... adventurer, clown, or thief as our identity ... To the extent that we grasp these false identities, we continually have to protect and defend ourselves, strive to fulfill what is limited or deficient in them, to fear their loss.

Yet these are not our true identity. (Kornfield, 1993:199)

The patterns Kornfield describes are not unlike the ones that Dąbrowski identifies when he describes the sense of self possessed by persons in primary integration, unilevel disintegration and even spontaneous multilevel disintegration. In other words when Buddhists make use of the doctrine of selflessness in their practice, the purpose is to encourage practitioners to relinquish identification with lower level conceptions of who they are, i.e., they are encouraged to relinquish identification with the “primitive drives and instincts” of primary integration (Dąbrowski & Piechowski, 1977:40); with the “influences directing behavior ... from external sources, or desires, moods and primitive drives” of unilevel disintegration (Dąbrowski & Piechowski, 1977:48-49); and, at the appropriate point, even the “various disposing and directing centers, representing antagonistic levels,” of spontaneous multilevel disintegration (Dąbrowski & Piechowski, 1977:42).

In a passage, on the disposing and directing centre, in *The dynamics of concepts*, Dąbrowski says that, as the personality develops, lower level identifications (or conceptions of the self) disintegrate and are eventually replaced by a higher unified disposing and directing center.

We may say that at ... [the] stage [of unilevel disintegration] there are many changeable, conflicting or cooperating centers of the same level of development. We may also speak of the activity of some or many “wills” as centers which alternately oppose or cooperate with one another.

When the development of the human individual is passing to the third phase—the phase of multilevel, spontaneous disintegration—these centers become less numerous, less differentiated in power and tension. The centers which represent hierarchically lower levels submit to the centers which represent higher levels. In this hierarchicalization all the dynamisms of the third phase of multilevel disintegration take part ... Those dynamisms which slowly disintegrate themselves into one disposing and directing center, slowly gain ground. However this center does not yet operate in a definite and clear manner.

It is only in the fourth stage of disintegration that one center is definitely formed and that it acts synthetically as one center on a high level.

On the highest level ... we have only one disposing and directing center which synthesizes intuitively all human tendencies. (Dąbrowski, 1973:102-103)

Thus, in terms of the theory of positive disintegration, growth requires the practice of something analogous to selflessness, at least with regard to lower level “wills,” or “centers,” i.e., lower level conceptions of the self. Dąbrowski does not, of course, say that the disintegration of these wills or centers, will be replaced by a vacuum, but that a center (or set of centers) will be replaced by a

higher set. Kornfield likewise is not suggesting that persons should have no disposing and directing center. He is aware that some may think this way, but he makes it clear that such a conception is a misunderstanding of what is meant by selflessness.

Misconceptions about selflessness and emptiness abound ....

Many students come to [Buddhist] spiritual practice with ... [the] problem some psychologists call a "weak sense of self" or a "needy ego," with holes in their psyche or heart. This deficient sense of self is carried for years by our habits and bodily contractions, by the stories and mental images we have learned and tell ourselves. If we have a deficient sense of self, if we perennially negate ourselves, then we may easily confuse our inner poverty with selflessness and believe it to be sanctioned as the road to enlightenment ....

Similar confusion happens when "emptiness" is misunderstood as "meaninglessness." This misperception can reinforce our underlying depression and fear of the world, justifying our inability to find beauty or lack of motivation to participate in life. (Kornfield, 1993:203-204)

Furthermore Kornfield says that dissolving an inadequate conception of self is only part of the task of a Buddhist practitioner, the other side is for the individual to discover his or her true nature, or his or her Buddha nature.

Dissolving the sense of self or experiencing the selfless nature of life is only one side of the coin ... the other is to develop a healthy sense of self .... When we have reclaimed some measure of ourselves, the next task becomes the further development of character, of our wisdom, strength, skill, and compassion ... the cultivation of ... qualities such as generosity, patience, mindfulness, and kindness.

The development of self then leads to a more fundamental level, the discovery of the true self. This is the discovery that the positive qualities of character that spiritual life works so hard to cultivate are already present as our true nature. From this sense of true nature, we can also discover and honor our individual or personal destiny ... the unique patterns through which our awakening will express itself. (Kornfield, 1993:207)

For Dąbrowski the ultimate goal of personality development is that the disposing and directing center becomes "totally unified and identified with the personality ideal" (Dąbrowski & Piechowski, 1977:56). Kornfield's description of the true self appears to be close to what Dąbrowski refers to as the personality ideal.

What is so interesting is that Kornfield emphasizes the unique, unrepeatable and personal character of the Buddha nature. Here is what he has to say:

In awakening our Buddha nature, we find that there is one further aspect of self to understand the need to honor our personal destiny ....

The universal qualities of our Buddha nature must shine through each of us, evolving out of the individual set of patterns in each person. This unique set of patterns we could call our character, our destiny, our individual path to fulfill. To discover our destiny is to sense wisely the potential of our individual life and the tasks necessary to fulfill it. To do so is to open to the mystery of our individual incarnation .... To sense the patterns and gifts given to us and to fulfill them is a wondrous part of the development of self. It is an honoring of our potential and our unique destiny. In this we can bring together our practice, our particular tasks in our family and community, fulfilling our capacities, our gifts, and our heart as a unique individual. As we do so, our individual nature reflects the universal.

Then when these qualities of the Buddha nature and personal self are combined with a deep realization of the emptiness of the self, we can be said to have fully discovered the nature of the self. This true self is both unique and universal. (Kornfield, 1993:211-212)

Not only does Kornfield argue that the Buddhist understanding of a person's true nature is an individual one with its own patterns, gifts and destiny but he further claims that, once enlightened, this unique self, far from being absorbed into an empty void, co-exists with a universal absolute.

Kornfield's description of the coexistence of a unique individual true nature with a larger all-encompassing universal is, at least to some extent, parallel to Dąbrowski's description of this relationship in religion at secondary integration. Religion at level V, Dąbrowski says, has the following character:

Union with God is experienced in meditation or in strong intuitive projections, leading to an inner understanding of God, the so-called infused knowledge. The deepest respect and love of God do not obliterate the awareness of one's individuality. This means that the sense of affinity and union with God exists together with preservation of distinct permanent essence. (Dąbrowski & Piechowski, 1977:217)

None of this is to say that the Buddhist understanding, of personal development and destiny, are identical to the views of Dąbrowski—simply to suggest that the differences may not be as great as Dąbrowski imagined them to be.

## >Making a distinction between empirical psychology and theology

Finally in closing I would like to raise another, and in a way, more fundamental, point. It is difficult to separate Dąbrowski's empirically based psychological theory from his metaphysical speculations, but the distinction must be made. Not everyone who is attracted to the theory of positive disintegration will be inclined toward Kierkegaardian religious existentialism, or necessarily toward any religious perspective at all. Dąbrowski had no need of such distinctions himself—both his psychological insights and his metaphysical beliefs proceeded as interconnected parts of a whole from his own unique individual essence. However if the theory of positive disintegration is to gain wide acceptance, and there are very good reasons why it should, then, it seems to me that a distinction must be made between the theory of personality development, as such, and Dąbrowski's personal metaphysical views. A psychological theory which claims to be empirically based is assessed by very different criteria than those used to interpret, compare, and evaluate the various theological or metaphysical positions of the world's religious traditions.

## Note

1. For the translations of all passages from *In Search of Mental Health*, I am indebted to Elizabeth Mika.

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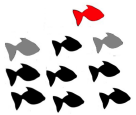
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