

Doing Religion in Phowa Courses: Studies on Praxeology and the Logic of Reflection in Courses on "Conscious Dying" in Diamond Way Buddhism

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Abstract: From the pragmatist viewpoint, as first formulated by John DEWEY following William JAMES, religiousness must be understood less as a specific kind of experience than as an "adjustment" towards an epistemic perspective that throws a different light on all experiences. Religiousness thus has to do with a particular relationship between the self and the world which is seen from a holistic perspective. But how can religious attitudes and meaning systems be established and sustained that are foreign and which from the modern standpoint seem doubtful?

Taking the Phowa meditation practised in Tibetan Buddhism as an example, this study shows how spiritual teachings that initially appear to Western adepts to be strange and esoteric can gain in credibility and meaningfulness through an interweaving of group processes, visualisations, body-oriented exercises and mental experiences in an overarching arrangement. The analysis is based on empirical data obtained in narrative interviews conducted with teachers and learners of Diamond Way Buddhism who have been socialised in the west. The interviews were analysed using a method based on the documentary method, expanded by contextual analysis in order to do justice to the interviewees' reflections on their religious relationships to their selves and the world.

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1. Introduction

"A monocontextural world is a dead world and death is accessible everywhere: another expression of the fact that all living things must die. From the standpoint of the logician the phenomenon of death is simply the transition from polycontexturality to the monocontextural. [...] Life and contextural rupture in reality are only two different ways of saying the same thing. What is beyond the rupture is simply inaccessible. What is meant by this must immediately be clear to anyone if we draw attention to a very everyday experience. For each experiencing I, the innermost privacy of the subjectivity of the Thou is a space that is just as inaccessible as the mythological dimensions inhabited by the heavenly hosts. In both cases we are on the verge of the rupture of a context which is no greater or smaller in any one case than in the other" (Gotthard GÜNTHER, 1975, pp.61f.).¹

While the modern Western striving to achieve comprehensive integration of one's relationships to oneself and the world, that can be understood as a quest that is religious in the broadest sense of the word, has not disappeared as the world has become "disenchanted" (WEBER, 1946 [1919]), in the current "secular era" (TAYLOR, 2009 [2007]) the religious meanings are subject to a special pressure. On the one hand from the perspective of a realist, scientific worldview they can be doubted, and on the other they come up against a culture of "expressive individualism" (TAYLOR, 2003, pp.88f.) which is more interested in a spirituality that is experience-oriented than in submitting to the dogmas and rules of religious institutions (KNOBLAUCH, 2009). However, contrary to the expectations of the classical theories of modernity, religiosity is not disappearing in enlightened societies, but rather finds many different forms of expression. This is leading to a fundamental contradiction between the religion's claim to be an all-encompassing, comprehensive worldview and religiosity as one mode of existence among others. [1]

The conceptualisation of this problem presented in this article expands on a pragmatist perspective. Empirically, the question was investigated in a study on Phowa meditation, which is practised in Tibetan Buddhism. The study demonstrated how religious practice develops a complex arrangement in which various different forms of subjectively perceptible signs and social relationships—including the continuing possibility of epistemic doubt—produce an overarching pattern or arrangement which in turn supports the religious practice. [2]

We begin by taking a look at the current state of research on Buddhism, focusing specifically on the issue of religious practice. Many people in Western countries find Buddhism interesting because since the founding of the World Parliament in Chicago in 1893² it has been seen as more modern than the other religions and also offers numerous different procedures and practices through which spirituality

1 All quotations from works for which only the German reference has been given in the list of references have been translated into English by the translator Deirdre WINTER. We thank her very much for her thorough work.

2 The founding of the World Parliament in Chicago drew attention to the idea of a symmetrical comparison of the religions also in the USA and Europe for the first time.

can be can be experienced first-hand. It is thus compatible with the idiotypical mode of reception of a highly industrialised society. With its "not-self" (Pali: *anattā*) doctrine, Buddhism seems in a sense to provide an antidote to the demands of further individualisation. As the execution of a collective and institutionalised practice this effect may initially seem paradoxical, however, as the present becomes the focus of attention subjectively, its effect can be experienced as transcendence.³ [3]

Thus Buddhist teachings, ways of experiencing oneself individually, practices carried out in communities and the institutions that pass them on/teach them, which are hierarchically organised, appear to enter into a special arrangement. We can assume this since on the one hand, as did PHILLIPS and AARONS (2005) in Australia, we observed a rather traditional style of religious commitment that differs substantially from the New Age style, which is that of an individualised popular religion. Here we have to do with a growing group of serious adepts who generally commit to a path or tradition and then stay with it, with the result that there are now a large number of adherents not only in eastern countries, but also in the West who have followed a path for over 25 years. As a rule these long-term practitioners also adopt specific dogmas of their schools.⁴ On the other hand, as SHARF (1995) has pointed out, modern experience-oriented Buddhism is in a sense a new spiritual invention (or reinvention) that only partly builds on the Buddhist traditions of Asian countries. In the practice of a traditional monk meditative practice and striving for enlightenment tend not to be that central.⁵ [4]

At first glance these two findings appear contradictory, however, they point towards the very tension that is typical of the practice of highly individualised Western adepts, i.e., the search for religious and spiritual authenticity of the institutions that embody the teachings, while at the same time they want to experience the truth of the teachings themselves. The success of many schools of Western Buddhism must therefore be considered to be a response to the problems posed by the modern era in regard of religious meaning. However, one could also say that Western Buddhism is in a sense the individualised religion of modernity par excellence, since it brings together both the striving for further subjectivisation and the desire to solve the associated societal demands through transcendence. However, here the question arises as to how modern Buddhist schools manage to sustain this balancing act and to create a bridge between ancient traditions and modernity, between experience, faith and knowledge, between institutions and autonomous individuals. [5]

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- 3 Following CHUNG (2012 [2010], p.14), this process can, with reference to GIRARD's theory of mimesis, be described as a "paradox of world-constructing Buddhist world-renunciation".
 - 4 The laissez-faire characteristics of the initial period appear to have been overcome stricter standards of ethical conduct are now being required of representatives of Buddhist institutions, also in the West (CADGE, 2007; COLEMAN, 2002).
 - 5 However, here it is important to note that, in contrast to the Buddhist schools in their countries of origin (i.e., Zen Buddhism in Japan and Theravāda Buddhism in South-East Asia, which is oriented towards the original texts); Tibetan Buddhism did not undergo a process of modernisation during the period of colonial rule. Rather, it came to the West when the Chinese seized power in Tibet in the nineteen sixties, bringing with it elements of Tibetan culture, many of which appear magical and esoteric, and it was only here that it was adapted to the perspective of a scientifically-oriented culture (SAMUEL, 1983).

Of the substantial number of studies on Western Buddhism carried out to date (e.g., BAUMANN, 2002; NUMRICH, 2003; SEAGER, 1999; WILLIAMS & QUEEN, 1999)⁶ relatively few have used ethnographic or reconstructive methods and focused on the concrete practice of Western adepts or how this practice is reproduced in institutionalised (ritual) forms and how it is interwoven with (other) their lifeworlds. BITTER (1988) investigated the constellations in individuals' life histories that lead to conversion to Tibetan Buddhism. SAALFRANK (1997) describes ritual, subcultural and life history aspects of the development of the German version of the Kagyu school of Tibetan Buddhism. OBAIDA (2008) investigated the transformation of Tibetan Buddhism into a therapeutic approach and McKENZIE (2011) the balancing act required to keep a school authentic in the face of specific demands of Western students. PROHL (2004) demonstrated the links between practice, experiencing and forms of ritual in a Zen group. PAGIS (2009, 2010a, 2010b) reconstructs the relationships between Buddhist teachings, the socialisation of the adepts and the embodiment of a specific culture of practice, taking Vipassanā meditation as an example.⁷ This reveals that the soteriological dimension⁸ of the practices carried out does not consist in the experience of being part of a community and of collectivity alone, but also requires the theoretical concepts of Buddhist teachings, which must, however, be embodied in a specific way and is dependent on each individual school. [6]

Thus true Buddhist or religious practice is multidimensional. The body, consciousness, community, the teacher and the "holy" texts are linked together in ways that are specific to each school. However, how can we conceive of such a linkage theoretically in order on the one hand to be able to obtain a sufficiently close-meshed insight into the empirical state of affairs and on the other to use empirical methods to gain the evidence required to arrive at a comprehensive theory of Western Buddhist practice that is founded on many-faceted experiences of individuals. The next section (Section 2) begins with an outline of a suitable metatheoretical approach. This is followed by a presentation of the data and methods employed in the study (Section 3). Section 4 then presents a reconstructed case and a concluding discussion. [7]

2. Towards a View of Religious Practices as Many-Valued Constellations of Logics

To expand the metatheoretical approach we will begin with some insights from pragmatism that have relevance for the study of religion. We also introduce a perspective from the logic of reflection in order to draw attention especially to the complex constellations of logics and "arrangements" of religious practices which

6 Although the West's early encounters with Buddhism must be considered to have been strongly influenced by protestant modes of thought (BAUMANN, 1997; McMAHAN, 2008) and the later experiential understandings were influenced by the counter-cultures of the nineteen sixties, especially, here again we see that Western Buddhism cannot be comprehended simply as a variant of Western culture—e.g., as in the individualistic New-Age spirituality of an "invisible religion" (LUCKMANN, 1991 [1967]).

7 Vipassanā is the main meditation technique of the schools of Theravāda Buddhism and is often translated as "insight meditation".

8 The Greek word *σωτηρία* (*sotēria*) means redemption and salvation.

must always integrate different perspectives of reflection, some of which are incommensurable. [8]

2.1 Pragmatism: Preverbal experience and adjustment

In what follows we look at Buddhist practices first from the pragmatist perspective developed by John DEWEY following William JAMES's "The Varieties of Religious Experience" (1917 [1901]). According to DEWEY (1986 [1934]), religiousness would appear to be less a specific mode of experiencing⁹ than an adjustment¹⁰ towards an epistemic perspective that throws a new light on all experiences. In this view, religiousness must not be confused with a specific belief content, but be seen as making it possible to experience things in a special way which frames and allows us to understand experiencing, perception and reflection in a special way (p.9). Thus religiosity is aimed at a specific relationship of the self with itself and between the self and the world within which the individual's relationship to the world is seen from an all-encompassing perspective. Accordingly, what is meant by adjustment is not merely a modification of meanings, but rather a shift in the individual's epistemic stance towards the world. [9]

However, for DEWEY this difference is only possible as a result of an "imaginative projection" (p.14) within which the self can relate to each of the respective changing scenes of its experience of the world through an "imaginative totality" that appears to it to be a spiritual universe.¹¹ This is the only way in which transcendence can be introduced into the here-and-now, i.e., as the perspective towards the world assumed in the here-and-now. In perspectives of reflection that are incommensurate with each other, such an adjustment takes place on the basis of a complex arrangement which includes and excludes claims to validity depending on the situation. While a person is no longer the same after a spiritual transformation, s/he still has to continue acting in a modern world in which academic notions of rationality, for example, still prevail. From the perspective of practice theory such a more or less subtle arrangement of perspectives must be repeatedly reproduced and thus requires continuous practice that re-actualises the associated frames. [10]

The question thus arises as to how the relationships between the self and itself and the self and the world and the transformation that occurs in the process of religious adjustment can be suitably captured by analysis. From pragmatism we

9 Here we are staying with the English concept of experience as understood in pragmatism. Unlike the German term *Erfahrung*, experience includes more of the dynamic quality of experiencing and less the reflective assimilation of what is experienced.

10 The English concept of adjustment refers both to the adaptation and to a new value orientation in which the individual experiences appear or lend meaning. DEWEY's adjustment then would then appear to be not simply a mere attitude, but more a stance towards everyday experiences of living.

11 "The self is always directed toward something beyond itself and so its own unification depends upon the idea of the integration of the shifting scenes of the world into that imaginative totality we call the Universe" (DEWEY, 1986 [1934], p.14). In the pragmatist view, this "shift" to a religious worldview would also be associated with "better adjustment in life and its conditions" (p.11).

can first learn that we need to conceive of the self in a much broader way than simply as a reflective reconfirmation of itself.¹² Following DEWEY it can be seen as a flow of experience that arises from the interaction of an organism with its environment and in which "(initially) subject and object [are] not distinguished, and at the primary, prereflexive level of experience the subject-object positions thus remain blurred. Such distinctions can only be made upon reflection of this experience" (NOHL, 2006a, p.83). This is precisely the starting point of MEAD's distinction between the I and the me. The I refers to the "amorphous, unorganised field of what we call inner experience", while the me designates the typifying "transferring of social objects into an inner experience" (1912, p.405). In this context, what we, following SCHÜTZ (1981 [1932]), understand as an action or experience is only the conscious portion of a more comprehensive relationship to the world. This becomes particularly evident in connection with the problem of interaction, since according to NOHL (2006a) in the encounter between two persons two bodily performances, i.e., it is "always their I's" that interact, while in consciousness "this interaction can in turn only be 'represented' at the level of the 'me's'". It thus becomes conceivable that several "I's" interact together in such a way that they do not need their "me's" (p.185). Examples would be spontaneous collective action practices or the ritual forms of the process of community relationships (*Vergemeinschaftung*) that we frequently find in Buddhist schools. Thus, for example, as PAGIS (2014) has pointed out, meditative sitting in silence cannot be considered to be an asocial space since the silent meditators do in fact perceive how they express themselves bodily and communicate non-verbally. This can evoke a special quality of the experience of calm and peace (ibid.). It is here that we encounter forms of collectivity and community formation that generate a "we" as an experiential space which can then later—in some way—be assimilated by reflection. [11]

However, since pragmatism remains confined within the perspective of actor- or action-centred theory, it has no satisfactory way to conceptualise collectivity as an independent experiential space, as several authors, for example NOHL (2006a, pp.205ff.) have commented. Pragmatism also cannot define abstract perspectives of reflection that are not associated with an individual—LATOURETTE (2013 [2012], p.376) would speak of "modes of existence"—as independent epistemic perspectives, although this is of central importance for understanding religious practices. This is due to the fact that if transcendence as a sphere that is not phenomenally accessible integrates the world (adjustment) this very transcendence must both be integrated into the world and already be integrated in the world. It is socially, organisationally, mentally and collectively embedded and embodied, even although it cannot be assigned to an ontic space in this world (i.e., in immanence). At the same time religious practice is confronted with various different rationalities (e.g., science and politics) that it cannot simply ignore. It must therefore succeed in finding transcendence in immanence and transform immanence into transcendence—but without being able to subsume

12 In a pragmatist-inspired sociology of knowledge the Cartesian dualism of the subject-object dichotomy can be avoided by developing a perspective that is "consistently relational, but not relationistic" (STRÜBING, 2007, p.127).

immanence in a single religious semantics. It is this very ambivalence that characterises religiosity in contemporary individualised modernity. [12]

2.2 Expanding theory using GÜNTHER's logic of reflection

As should by now have become clear, pragmatism offers us some important clues as to how the development of religious meaning and knowledge can be reconstructed. However, several important issues need to be further expanded upon. To begin with, following Bruno LATOUR (2007 [2005]) there is a need for an empirical metaphysics: the question arises as to how states of being—that are ontological certainties—can be constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed in a given situation in order to create a constellation that is a more or less sustainable overall arrangement. There is also a need for a conceptualisation that does not argue simply in the logic of being—and be it only with the positiveness of the "stream of consciousness" (JAMES, 1918 [1890], p.180)—, but also permits references to something that is not accessible to being or phenomenal experience, but can still effectively enter into being in the form of a reflection.¹³ This is the only means by which it can become possible to concede that abstract entities—such as God, the transcendent Buddhas, and Nirvāṇa as the soteriological goal of Buddhism that is unattainable in terms of positivistic scientific "truth"—can have an effect, without having to simplify them in the process by reducing them to signs or symbols. Moreover, we can assume the co-presence of different logical spaces, i.e., that in human praxis different perspectives of reflection co-exist without them having to be merged into each other. Thus, for example, a person can still retain their scientific attitude of doubt if they experience certainty through their faith, or they can feel merged with the lama (the spiritual teacher in Tibetan Buddhism) while at the same time experiencing their own subjectivity as strengthened. [13]

Ontology is inseparably linked to logic, i.e., to the issue of being or not-being. An empirical metaphysics that starts from the assumption of multiple logical spaces or modes of existence (LATOUR, 2013 [2012]) needs a many-valued logic as an instrument of reflection, since without it there can ultimately be only one subject, that is, only one epistemic centre of reflection. We would then remain stuck in the monadic structure of the I as formulated in German idealism (LEIBNIZ, 1971 [1704]), which only recognises the self-reference of an identity that is entangled in its own constructions. It would then not be possible to use linguistic typifications to label alterity and transcendence in a way that goes beyond assimilation.¹⁴ However, such a stance would not do justice to the metaphysical richness of the personal experiences that we find in Buddhist practice, especially as the soteriological goal that is expressly striven for is to overcome linguistic meaning.¹⁵ [14]

13 For the significance of negativity in Christianity from the perspective of the philosophy of religion see Thomas RENTSCH (2010).

14 Here there is a marked difference between the concept of transcendence we are proposing and the transcendences discussed by LUCKMANN (1991 [1967]).

15 Luc FERRY (2002, p.32) accordingly comes to the conclusion that the goal of the Buddhist path to salvation is to "arrive at a worldview in which the question as to meaning disappears".

We therefore propose that the analytical perspective of pragmatism should be expanded with the aid of Gotthard GÜNTHER's theory of polycontextuality (1979). ORT (2007) has previously drawn attention to the fact that the metatheoretical structure of pragmatism lends itself to such an expansion by reviewing GÜNTHER's work in the light of PIERCE's semiotics and demonstrating the validity of her claim in the field of literary studies. [15]

In Gotthard GÜNTHER's theory contextures are reflective relationships, each of which expresses and shapes a specific relationship to self and the world. GÜNTHER suggested introducing a logic that is able to deal with multiple values and developed a theory of polycontextuality.¹⁶ His basic idea is that in classical, two-valued logic the operation of negation is a step that points beyond two-valuedness. As a result of the axioms of classical logic, the principle of identity, the principle of the exclusion of contradiction and the principle of the excluded third a relationship of exchange between p (p is) and $\sim p$ (the state of affairs of p is not) is established in which each of the two positions is determined by its difference from the other. Only negation represents itself. GÜNTHER points out that negation must transcend two-valuedness simply by the fact that it constitutes it in the first place, although the associated relationship of reflection is not itself determined by the axioms. [16]

Accordingly it is negation which GÜNTHER takes as the starting point for developing his many-valued logic. Thus seen, it must be considered to be a transjunctional operation because it is what constitutes the unity of a given two-valued structure as a contexture in the first place. However, directing the attention towards this operation of constitution transcends it, as it were, and makes it possible to develop further contextures. In this sense the transjunctional operation is an indication of the respective observer position. It renders it possible to switch between different contextures as different loci or positions of reflection. [17]

In addition, several individual contextures can develop a common metastructure which GÜNTHER calls a compound contexture (1979, pp.191ff.). In his view, a minimum of three elemental contextures are required to create such a compound contexture, the third contexture regulating the relationship between the other two. While classical philosophical logic can operate with the exclusive polarity of being and non-being, GÜNTHER's theory overcomes the rigid contraposition of being and nothingness that we still find in SARTRE (2006 [1943]) and thus arrives at a processual and ontological openness of being, in which the primary givens of empirical analysis can be both being and non-being. [18]

At this point it is important to realise that applying the instruments of the logic of reflection should not be seen as an epistemological "glass bead game" (HESSE, 2000 [1943]), but serves primarily to provide us with analytical concepts that will allow us to gain access to the metaphysical richness of the reflexive relationships

16 Polycontextuality is a subject that arose in particular in connection with LUHMANN's systems theory (1995). However, to date contextural analysis has rarely been used in empirical sociological research, although there have long been calls for research to be done in this way (see BÜHL, 1969).

of contemporary religious practice, or, to cite LATOUR: "cutting the social sciences from the reservoirs of philosophical innovations is a recipe to make sure that no-one will ever notice the metaphysical innovations proposed by ordinary actors—which often go beyond those of professional philosophers" (2007 [2005], p.51). [19]

The relevance of GÜNTHER's theory for the science of religion becomes clear when, for instance, we attempt to comprehend the soteriological promise of *nibbāna* (Pali, Sanskrit: *nirvāṇa*) as a the definitive goal of salvation. According to the classical, two-valued logic of being, *nibbāna* is the negation of being, i.e., nothing, and it is thus not surprising that the Pali concept has frequently been translated as "extinguished" and that the first European scholars to address it associated it with depressiveness (e.g., SCHOPENHAUER, 2012 [1859]). However, this interpretation contrasts starkly with those of all of the currently existing schools of Buddhism, which see *nibbāna* as something absolutely positive (see KING, 1964, pp.89f.). Thus the soteriological meaning of *nibbāna* does not derive from a logic of being in which the negation of experience and consciousness is equated with non-consciousness and death. Rather, it becomes understandable from the perspective of a "negative language" (GÜNTHER, 1980, p.22) in which negation goes beyond two-valued logic—nothing is not nothing, but refers to transcendence in an unknown space. Only reflection expressed in negative language is indicative of a relationship of reflection in which what is not existent, what does not appear and does not pass away is associated with transcendence. Only in this way can the soteriological meaning of Buddhism be effective in practice, since it makes it possible for adepts to shift back and forth between the two modes of negation in interpretative processes during their practice.¹⁷ [20]

2.3 Self-relating and the problem of death

In addition to the above, the contextural method can also be used to achieve a more precise analysis of the emergence of the subject-object dichotomy postulated by both DEWEY and MEAD. To start with, the "I" stands for a simple relationship of reflection, i.e., the reflection of the "it" by the "I", in which the subject contraposes itself to a world by means of reflection. The establishment of this relationship also opens up a contexture, i.e., an epistemic centre that has an ontology, since the subject that is thus constituted not only is world, but also conducts itself towards the world. At the same time as such a monocontexture comes into being, the possibility of death arises, that is, the only possible logical conclusion is that there can be a world in which there is no longer an "I". Thus the relationship of reflection opened up by the evocation of the idea of death generates the possibility of negation. However, in the context of a soteriological communication this again can be understood as the negation of the alternative of being or non-being as a kind transcendence in an open space. [21]

¹⁷ See VOGD (2018, forthcoming) for a detailed discussion of this from the perspective of practice and the theory of communication.

As soon as we enter the social sphere, i.e., take into account the existence of an "alter-ego", the world appears as a polycontextural world. While the "I-It" relationship is a relationship between a subject and an objectifiable object and accordingly forms a simple contexture, with the "I-Thou" relationship we have a different situation. In the relationship of reciprocal exchange there is a different "I" behind the "Thou" which forms its own subject-object relationship—and thus its own contexture with an ontology of its own. Since the phenomenal perspective of the "Thou" is not accessible from the monocontexture of the "I", the reflection of the "Thou" adds something to one's own reality which is not covered by the reflection of being in the subject. We have no access to the subjectivity of the other. [22]

It is also possible to reflect on the relationship between two contextures. For instance, the "I" can contemplate the "it-Thou" relationship (i.e., the perception and perspective of an other). The reflective distance thus produced allows us to execute an operation which discards the view suggested by the binary structure that perception is irreducible. For example, the perceiver cannot see an illusion for what it is. However, from the perspective of a further contexture that reflects the relationship between the perceiver and the object perceived, the perception can be called into question or be assigned a different status. Thus transjunctional operations of bringing different contextures into relation with each other are not confined to a single relationship to being (GÜNTHER, 1978). The relationships between other contextures can be configured by reflection, by affirming certain perspectives of reflection while screening out or even rejecting others, either partially or completely. [23]

Thus transjunctional operations open up a differentiated perspective for analysing what in the science of religion is generally discussed in terms of the relationship between immanence and transcendence. This relationship is now seen as an immanent practice of reflection, which, however, accesses values that are not accessible through positive language—as mentioned above, this also applies in the case of the alter ego. [24]

2.4 The lived body, community and society

In order to achieve our goal of analysing spiritual or religious transformation processes from a polycontextural perspective we need to take a closer look at some possible forms of relationship, i.e., those between the "I" and the body, the "I" and the community and the "I" and society, which we shall briefly address in what follows. Corporeality itself is not a logical unit, but must be seen as a compound contexture. This becomes clear when we look at the difference between reflecting on "having a body" and "being a body". Consciousness can feel identical with its body or not, this being moderated in a non-trivial way by language as something that is socially produced. On the one hand the dramas that spin the words "slip into" the body without the self being able to prevent it (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1962 [1945], p.236). On the other hand in our "inner talk", that is, in the internal dialogue of thinking the same psychomotor pathways are employed as in the execution of human interaction (FUCHS, 2010, pp.91ff.) Thus

even when disidentifying from our own bodies we also feel this subjective disidentification in our bodies. Thus consciousness can be seen as a differentiating structure of an overarching polycontextural arrangement. [25]

Moreover, the relationship between the "I" and the community must also be considered to be polycontextural, since here we are concerned with a prereflexive "we" in the sense of a collectivisation which can, however, be made conscious by reflection and take up a relational stance. One can be affected by the mood of a group and then behave in such a way as to affirm it or distance oneself from it. According to MEAD (1912) socialisation takes place not only on the level of the me to the me, but from I to I, and between these two levels. [26]

Furthermore, the different configurations of communicative reflection (*Reflexionsverhältnisse*) of society need to be more strongly emphasised than generally suggested by practice theory or pragmatism. In this way, science, medicine, religions etc. each form their own independent communicative contextures, which in turn modulate their relationships to each other. Thus, religious transcendence, scientific claims to truth and ontologies with a medical stamp, for example, can enter into a person's relationships with him- or herself, other people and the world. Unlike the "I-Thou" contextures, which are anchored in the body (we feel ourselves and can see and touch others), these contextures appear to be a-sensory abstractions. However, although as reflective configurations—they are unembodied reference points—they must be considered to be real because they have a structuring influence on other processes. In this sense spirits, imaginations and other phantasms stand to gain from the "coda speculativa" of the religions and philosophy (FUCHS, 2010, pp.298ff.), namely when these perspectives of reflection are evoked in communication and stabilised by other perspectives of reflection. [27]

BOYER (2001, pp.203ff.), in particular, has shown from the standpoint of the anthropology of religion how different sensory modalities and cognitive processes are interwoven. Such dualities regarding to the mind-body relationship can be experienced not only in encounters with other people (for instance, in the presence of people to whom one was once close and who are now dead), but also with respect to oneself. The latter is, for example, inherent in the possibility of having "out-of-body experiences" and can be experienced when the sensory representation of one's own body is distributed across two sensory modalities that dissociate from each other, and are then intertwined to form a specific metaphysical arrangement (see METZINGER, 2005). [28]

This brings us to the question that we set out to investigate in our study, since the above provides us with a set of analytical concepts that is sufficiently well elaborated to gain insight into the metaphysical richness of contemporary Buddhist practices. [29]

3. Data and Methodological Considerations

How can religious attitudes and religious knowledge be generated by concrete practices within concrete institutions of a Buddhist school? What is the relationship between practice and reflection in such a process? How does the way people relate to themselves and the world change in the course of a religious transformation? These are the main questions addressed in the study reported on below. [30]

3.1 Phowa as an unfamiliar practice in which the perspectives of reflection of the world that is familiar to us are reflected

Paradigmatically, the above-mentioned processes can be demonstrated particularly well using examples of religious practice that are on the one hand unfamiliar because their symbolism is culturally alien and may even appear abstruse, but are on the other hand practised by people who can, on the basis of their cultural characteristics, be considered to be typical products of a modern, Western socialisation. The practices of the various schools of Tibetan Buddhism, at first glance appear to be quite foreign but have been becoming more and more widespread in the West over the past 30 years and therefore provide us with a good starting point for reconstructing the development and stabilisation of religious orientations. Of particular interest are forms of religion that, due to the practices and symbols that they use and the cosmologies in which they are embedded, differ markedly from the basic ideas of Christian religions. [31]

In some schools of Tibetan Buddhism, especially Kagyu and Nyingma,¹⁸ Phowa meditation—which is also known as the "transference of consciousness" and the "practice of conscious dying" (SEEGERS, 2013, p.273)—is taught. The procedures are intended to help practitioners to learn how to go through a successful dying process while they are still alive so as to prepare them for death. This is thought to lead on to a happy rebirth in the sphere of influence of the transcendent Buddha Amitābha¹⁹ and to guarantee salvation. In addition, highly experienced practitioners are believed to be able to accompany people who have already died "on their way to a 'rebirth full of blessings'"²⁰ by means of "astral projection", which is achieved through the Phowa practice. [32]

Members of the Kagyu school, in particular, draw attention to visible bodily signs as evidence of successful completion of this practice. These signs are to be

18 Traditionally, Tibetan Buddhism is divided into four large schools, each of which has its own teaching traditions. These are the Kagyu, Nyingma, Gelug and Sakya schools.

19 The Buddha Amitābha plays an important role in Tibetan Buddhism since he is as being a primordial Buddha (Adibuddha) and grants access to the "Pure Land". Followers attempt to gain access to his land with the aid of the Phowa practices in order to be finally reborn in the "Buddha-field" (Sanskrit: *Buddhakṣetra*).

20 Tibetan Phowa includes both Amitābha Buddhism, which has been widespread in eastern Asia since the 5th century, and concepts and practices of Tantra Yoga derived from similar concepts in Indian yoga. They included in particular the idea of the existence of subtle energy channels through which the male and female essences can be combined in order, by means of the appropriate awareness exercises, to transmit or eject astral spheres. See ELIADE (1990 [1969], Chapter V) on the connection between yoga and Tantric Buddhism.

found not only in the skulls of deceased competent practitioners, but also in those of practitioners who are still alive. For example, when they have successfully completed the practice they are said to have a drop of blood on their fontanelle, which is thought to be the point of exit of consciousness. [33]

In the context of Western Buddhism the practice of Phowa has become known especially through two groups that are now widespread in Europe and America. In "Rigpa", which was founded by Sogyal RINPOCHE in 1979, an easy-to-learn visualisation exercise is taught that practitioners can use as a spiritual death vigil. Diamond Way Buddhism was founded in 1972 by Ole and Hannah NYDAHL and also offers its disciples intensive courses, the ultimate success of which is said to be evidenced by the above-mentioned signs. [34]

The Phowa practice can thus be seen as a special form of doing religion, by means of which death as the totally inaccessible negative of life can be "acquired" as a spiritual resource in life before death. From the standpoint of the sociology of religion it seemed useful to include the second school in our investigation, since here we find a special mode of combining spiritual teachings with reflection, visualisation, intensive body-oriented exercises, group processes, psychological experiences and bodily signs. [35]

The main questions that arise from the perspectives of analysis developed above are the following:

1. How does Phowa practice generate in the form of a practical implementation the spiritual evidence that first made the practice plausible and then permitted its institutionalisation (doing religion would thus also always be associated with doing ontology).
2. How do these metaphysical attitudes develop and become established over time?
3. How are doubts about the religious form allayed or how is evidence of belief linked to the dominant realistic worldview of our culture?
4. How is the arrangement of the relationships between the parts of the self and the self and the world changed by the religious practice and how can the modern, individualised self rediscover itself in this arrangement in a productive way?
5. How does such an arrangement that can always also be doubted under the circumstances of modernity become established and sustained? [36]

The Phowa meditation reconstructed in this article is, of course, only a specific form of practice that is used in this school alone. However, it is a typical example of how the relationship between immanence and transcendence is conceptualised in Tibetan Buddhism. The analyses are thus of interest for the science of religion in general, since from the perspective of the theory of practice the form or reproduction of the associated perspectives of reflection is reconstructed. [37]

3.2 Sampling and data collection

The study presented here is part of a larger research project conducted to reconstruct the specific forms of practice and development of meaning in six different Buddhist schools present in the West.²¹ It was designed as a comparison study with several groups. In order to be able to focus on the developmental dimension, both novices and moderately or existentially committed practitioners²², but also long-term practitioners, teachers and drop-outs from the different schools were included. The participants came from different schools of Buddhism, the sample containing practitioners from two schools each from Theravāda, Zen and Tibetan Buddhism. The sample was developed following the principle of theoretical sampling as originally proposed by GLASER and STRAUSS (1967). Both the selection of the cases and collection of the data were carried out consecutively and guided by the research process (see STRÜBING, 2002, 2008). [38]

The assumption, formulated on the basis of the theory of practice, was that religious knowledge does not develop in leaps and bounds, i.e., in a single leap of conversion, for instance, but in a continuous process of acquiring the respective practice that frequently lasts several years. Accordingly, marked differences are to be expected both between novices and masters within the individual schools and between the schools, some of which offer and emphasise widely differing kinds of links between teachings and practice. [39]

To date a total of 120 individual interviews and 10 group discussions have been carried out²³, spread across the six schools participating in the study. The average length of the interviews is roughly 90 minutes, the shortest lasting 35 minutes and the longest just under 4 hours.²⁴ In a few cases follow-up interviews have been conducted in order to obtain more insight into some interesting aspects. [40]

The empirical data of the study presented in this article consists of expert interviews with narrative elements (MEUSER & NAGEL, 2009), which were carried out with practitioners of Diamond Way Buddhism. According to Fritz SCHÜTZE (1983) the methodological strength of the narrative interview lies in the use of open questions, which allows the interviewees the opportunity to develop their own structures of relevance (SCHÜTZ, 2011 [1947-51]), i.e., to make their

21 The project is entitled "Buddhismus im Westen" ("Buddhism in the West") and has been granted funds from the German Research Foundation for the period from April 2013 to July 2016. See the first of the monographs from the project VOGD and HARTH (2015).

22 "Existential commitment" is understood here as an attitude according to which the Buddhist practice is so significant at the time it is being carried out that it is seen as almost a central, if not the most important element in the practitioner's life.

23 The group discussion procedure (see BOHNSACK, 2000) once more provides special insight into the frame of relevance and shared orientation of the groups investigated. For this reason a further data collection instrument was added.

24 Due to the large number of interviews only those interviews that were considered to be important were completely transcribed, whereas only certain selected passages of the others were transcribed. This was done by an external agency.

statements in keeping with their own implicit orientations. Ideally, the narratives reveal a stratification of experiences from which the individuals' structures of relevance and the ways in which they interpret their worlds can be reconstructed (see RIEMANN, 2003). However, in the current study the narrative interview can also be employed to obtain insights into the practitioners' orientations and patterns of attribution and then to attempt to reconstruct the explicit and implicit behavioural rules of the Buddhist modes of training. We are interested not so much in the reasons for the interviewees' commitment that lie in their personal histories as in all aspects that have to do with their secondary (and, where applicable, tertiary) socialisations in a Western Buddhist group. Thus, the interviews were mainly expert interviews as defined by MEUSER and NAGEL (2009). The knowledge of experts should not be considered to be simply formulaic, but is a form of knowledge that can be described as "unwritten laws" (BOGNER & MENZ, 2009, p.51). Thus in the interviews reported here particular attention was paid to the interviewees' experiences of their first Phowa courses. Where the interviewees described their experiences during their first Phowa courses in relatively long and dense narrative texts were obtained that indicated both the dynamics of the participants' experiences during the courses and their reflections and interpretations and how they assimilated the material. [41]

A total of 25 practitioners of this school were interviewed, including Lama Ole NYDAHL, the master or founder of the school, and two lower-ranking teachers. Two group discussions were also held. Three of the interviewees were long-term practitioners, four were novices, six were adepts who are "existentially" committed, two were students with only moderate commitment and five were drop-outs, i.e., students who abandoned Diamond Way Buddhism for various reasons. Three case examples that are representative of the entire spectrum of participants from novices to master status have been selected for the interpretation and presentation in this article. [42]

3.3 Methods of analysis

A qualitative study aspiring to gain insight into the questions formulated above must fulfil certain methodological requirements in regard to data analysis, for example, sensitivity concerning the epistemic attitudes embodied in the practices. A praxeological approach is required. To satisfy these requirements the documentary method (BOHNSACK, 2008) was employed for the study. This procedure allows systematic analysis of the data in three steps: the formulating interpretation, the reflecting interpretation and the comparative analysis. [43]

The documentary method initially emphasises mainly the distinction between immanent and documentary meaning as a difference that guides the observation and thus makes it possible to separate the levels of common sense theories and the logic of practice. For this reason for us it is the method of choice, since it provides us with a means of inferring the action-guiding orientations—in other words, the documentary meaning—that is associated with and shapes the religious practices. The documentary meaning is obtained by looking at the "same presentation of a problem" (NOHL, 2006b, p.12) in different interviews

(using formulating and reflecting interpretations, see below) and comparing the interviews with each other from the point of view of the problem presentation (comparative analysis). The only way in which the researcher's "rootedness in a standpoint" (MANNHEIM, 1982 [1936], p.274) can be dissolved is by contrasting it not only with his or her own background and knowledge, but also with the other cases that address the problem in a different way. The knowledge of the interpreters is thus not abrogated, but relativised (cf. NOHL, 2006b, p.13). [44]

Thus, the documentary method is oriented towards a multi-step process in which several steps of the analysis are carried out one after the other in order both to understand and interpret the individual cases and make it possible to arrive at a typification based either on meaning or on sociogenetic development. These steps can be defined as follows. In the formulating interpretation first an overview of the issues that arise and are immanent in the interview is compiled that shows the course of development of the themes. These are then reformulated in the words of the interpreter in the form of a fine structure. In the reflecting interpretation step latent patterns of orientation are differentiated out and viewed in relation to other cases by means of a comparative analysis (BOHNSACK, 2008, pp.178ff.). [45]

The documentary method can also be used to reconstruct implicit or prereflexive knowledge, since in the analysis special emphasis is laid on performative aspects and the frames expressed in them. As NOHL (2006a, pp.100ff.) has pointed out, with particular reference to DEWEY's work on the sociology of religion, a number of epistemological and metatheoretical homologies can also be drawn between pragmatism and BOHNSACK's praxeological sociology of knowledge. [46]

Moreover, as suggested by NEITZ and SPICKARD (1990), this is a methodological approach that not only recognises that non-everyday experiences are induced when body-oriented practices are executed in groups, but also, following Alfred SCHÜTZ (1981 [1932]), considers this induction to be associated with the preconceptional social experience of shared inner time. This is also highly consistent with contemporary cognitive phenomenology accounts (ZAHAVI, 2008). However, it should also be taken into account that in such a conceptualisation of religious experience spiritual experience is not possible without some understanding of the narratives in which this experience is embedded (YAMANE, 2000). It is precisely here that the hermeneutic technique of reflecting interpretation used in the documentary method comes into play, which is then employed to draw conclusions about the latent levels of practice. [47]

In order to be able to do justice to the perspectives of reflection that are involved in the participants' religious relationships with themselves and the world the reflecting interpretation was expanded upon by a contextual analysis (JANSEN & VOGD, 2014, pp.459ff.; JANSEN, VON SCHLIPPE & VOGD, 2015; VOGD, 2014, pp.9ff.) The aim was to identify the respective logical spaces that produce or give rise to individuals' specific modes of relating to themselves and the world. These are evident particularly in the ways in which perspectives that focus on the social dimension of meaning are aligned with each other and how they are expressed

linguistically, for instance, by means of certain prepositions, parentheses, forms of distancing, etc. One thing that is of interest here is how the boundaries between the origins of meanings and contextures are determined. This can be observed, for example, every time that problems and tensions which are marked by certain linguistic practices arise in the narratives, for example, distancing strategies, switching frames—indicating a change in the configuration of perspectives. At the same time in terms of the many-valued hermeneutics of contextural analysis it is important to see "how contextures are opened and closed by different transjunctional operations" (JANSEN et al., 2015, §30). Those practices with which "different spaces of reflection [are] brought into a stable arrangement" with each other (ibid.), e.g., the marking of taboos by interruption of meaning-making and barriers to reflection, should be especially sought. In a second step contextural analysis can be used to establish how different perspectives of reflection condition each other reciprocally, i.e., become stabilised in a sustained arrangement with regard to the interviewees' modes of relating to themselves and the world. [48]

From the standpoint of practice theory it should also be pointed out that while experience and reflection constitute each other reciprocally, they are not linked in a temporal sense, nor are they necessarily synchronous in terms of content. Meditative practices that are carried out over several hours or several days, frequently in silence, can lead to impressive experiences in students who often do not understand their underlying meaning or conceptual status within the Buddhist doctrinal system until some years later, if at all (PAGIS, 2009, 2010a). Accordingly, the passages of the interviews in which such experiences are addressed contain some important indications for the contextural analysis, i.e., indications of the copresence of different perspectives of reflection that can come together in an arrangement in different ways. [49]

4. Reconstruction of the Phowa Practice

For the purposes of this article we have decided to begin with a brief outline of the setting of the course (Section 4.1) and then to present the report of a female participant who has taken part in only one course (Section 4.2). This is followed by the more detailed analysis of the case of a long-term female practitioner who in retrospect sees the Phowa course as a major experience of initiation (Section 4.3). Finally, we present some sequences from our interview with Lama Ole NYDAHL (Section 4.4). These three cases thus exemplify different modi of being affected by, distancing from and contexturalisation of the implicit and explicit contents of the Phowa course.²⁵ This is in line with the typical developmental course of increasing assimilation of Buddhist practice by novices in their first course to identification with the practice in masters. [50]

²⁵ Interestingly, for the research question addressed in this article no difference was found between the drop-outs and the participants who remained in the school as regards their reflection on their meditative practice. We have therefore decided not to include the presentation of a drop-out.

In general the interpretations of the interviews in Sections 4.2—4.4 follow the following pattern:

- summarising, formulating interpretation,
- transcription of the interviews,
- a reflecting interpretation, and
- where appropriate a contextual analysis that shows the relations between or the arrangement of the different perspectives of reflection. [51]

4.1 The setting

To date Phowa courses in Diamond Way Buddhism have been introduced by a lecture by Ole NYDAHL²⁶ in which he explains the basic concepts of Tibetan Buddhism insofar as they apply to the meditation course that follows and gives details of some of the rules of the course. In this context he also announces that the practitioners will receive "signs" on different levels. Some of these will be external signs that will be visible on the surface of the head in the region of the fontanelle, where the consciousness emerges. Sometimes this is a tear in the skin of the scalp, sometimes a drop of blood, but often simply a small scab. Participants are also informed that they will experience internal, psychological signs and that these will manifest themselves initially in the form of numerous problems, but then later in the joys of purification and liberation. The Lama will also appear as a screen for both positive and negative projections. NYDAHL assures participants that all this is fine and even an indication that the meditation is working and that they should simply continue. Finally, he tells them that their efforts will end in being able to recognise their own Buddha nature, i.e., to experience that one can only see and visualise the Buddha outside because one has always been Buddha oneself inside.²⁷ [52]

In addition, course participants are told not to talk to each other about their own inner experiences since everybody has different experiences and comparing them with those of others can have a highly disturbing effect on the own meditation—and thus on their own spiritual progress. Talk about other subjects is, however, permitted during the course. [53]

The lecture is an essential part of the course simply because in it expectations, such as the fact that signs will occur, are expressed and conveyed by a significant other and thus the practice of the individual practitioners is in some way structured in advance. The duration of the actual course is usually four to seven days, the days being structured by three three-hour meditation sessions. In these sessions a certain visualisation is developed which is intended to lead to the merger of the practitioners' own consciousnesses with Buddha Amitābha on the top of their heads. This exercise is combined with the recitation of a specific

26 For an example of Ole NYDAHL's introductions see that to the Phowa meditation of Diamond Way Buddhism given on July 23, 1993 in Immenhausen, Germany: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FgZDoq1VfNI> [Accessed: December 9, 2014].

27 See NYDAHL (1996) for a compact introduction to the Phowa meditation of Diamond Way Buddhism, and NYDAHL (2011) for a more detailed monograph.

mantra²⁸ that ends in a certain key tone and is associated with a chanting and breathing rhythm that makes a strong impression. Participants who are attending a Phowa course for the first time are instructed to sit at the front, i.e., between the stage on which the Lama who is leading and orchestrating the exercise is sitting and the back of the room where the experienced practitioners sit. Since there are frequently 2,000 to 3,000 participants in a course, this alone gives rise to an impressive group dynamic. [54]

In the last third of the course the teacher goes through the rows of meditating participants and examines their heads together with his team. According to his own report²⁹ external signs indicating the success of the Phowa meditation are found in almost all of the new students. [55]

Last, but not least, during the lecture and the course participants are also informed that the Phowa practice can also be used to accompany relatives and friends who have already died on their way towards rebirth. Tibetan Lamas, and also Ole NYDAHL, can also be requested to accompany the deceased persons themselves. The meditation that is taught in the Phowa thus seems to be a more or less universally applicable technique for dealing with the death of another person. [56]

Thus, the Phowa practice of Diamond Way Buddhism is a setting or arrangement that combines various different aspects. We find a teacher who is both charismatic and has great significance for this path of practice, a community of practitioners, a highly specific, body-oriented practice of imagination, courses organised as mass events and the religious concepts of Tibetan Buddhism. Although the Phowa practice is embedded in the traditional spiritual cosmology of Tibetan Buddhism it is increasingly being "translated" into German in various publications of German Buddhists and thus in a sense also becoming more and more Europeanised.³⁰ [57]

This brings us to the question as to how the above-mentioned aspects are interlinked in the practice and reflection of Western adepts. We begin with Ms. Vera Schiller³¹, for whom the course was very important, but not necessarily in a sense that could be considered religious. [58]

28 Mantras are words and syllables that are charged with meaning and recited out loud or in the mind.

29 See, for example, the website of the Europe Center where many of the Phowa courses are held: <http://europe-center.org/ec-blog/de/2012/08/11/phowa-course-with-lama-ole-nydahl/> [Accessed: July 7, 2015].

30 See Manfred SEEGER (2001) for an example of such a translation.

31 Both the names and some details of the following interview have been changed in order to ensure the anonymity of the interviewees.

4.2 Community-building

At the time of the interview Vera Schiller was 39 years old and no longer so closely involved in Diamond Way Buddhism. She reported that she had participated in a Phowa course two years earlier on the recommendation of friends and her partner. [59]

Ms. Schiller went on to say that initially she had not known what to expect of the course. To start with she had been "stressed out" by sitting on the floor, but then she had got further and further into the meditation exercise, and it had finally "felt very good". The group atmosphere, in particular, had touched her deeply and she had since come to understand what the other practitioners gain from these courses.

"I felt a bit resentful as I was going there. Oh God, it's six days and a lot of meditation and you don't know what's going to happen. And the idea of the course is in fact that you don't know so much about the content of what's going to happen in advance. [...] ³² And um then it started and I continued to find the first evening stressful, also because there was very little room, again/ One only had this small place and, and/ in such situations the Buddhists say those are the really typical things and it all goes away, but for me that um is different, that is, it keeps coming back, a, that is this/ and the whole time you're sitting on the floor, this all sounds a bit diva-esque, but it, it simply stressed me out. And then I was um somehow from the second day onwards and that was when the actual Phowa meditation began and somehow I got more and more into it. And I can't say what it was/ But it was somehow, somehow it was, felt very good. And also it was a group atmosphere that somehow appealed to me. And um I also felt something during this meditation, although I can't locate it in any way or um put a name to it or describe it, but it was/ it didn't/ it had never affected me in that way before. And um I had the feeling: now I understand what people experience and they apparently experience it much more intensely than I did and also in other situations. So I think that WAS exactly that." [60]

In connection with our research question in this interview sequence we first find a temporal interlinking of different aspects and experiences interesting. First, there is a certain resistance and doubt about attending the course because she did not know in advance what she would be letting herself in for. Seen in this light participating in a course like this seems like an adventure whose basic framework is known—it was an intensive course in the Tibetan Buddhist technique of conscious dying, but the details of the process and what they would mean for the participant were not clear. The organisers make it clear that the associated dramaturgy of the leap into the unknown is intended ("The idea of the course is in fact that you don't know so much about the content of what's going to happen in advance") Thus if one attends such a course the expectation is that something special, something unexpected will happen, whether one wants or not. [61]

32 The interviews were transcribed following rules following those described by DRESING and PEHL (2013). They were transcribed word for word, not phonetically or in summarised form. The punctuation was simplified in the interests of readability. Broken-off sentences were marked by a slash ("/"), while words and utterances said or made with special emphasis were written in capitals. Omissions were shown in square brackets. Nonverbal utterances (e.g., laughs, sighs and other sounds) were typed in brackets.

However, in this example the practice of meditation initially seems to be unpleasant and strenuous ("it simply stressed me out"). However, the Phowa practice is an exercise that can be learned with time. Ms. Schiller becomes more familiar with it as time goes on and also associates success with the exercise with positive feelings, which, in turn, appear to be associated with aspects of the group atmosphere ("It was somehow, it felt quite good. And it was a kind of group atmosphere that somehow appealed to me"). After this experience Ms. Schiller is also able to understand on a feeling level why other meditators appreciate this course ("I had the feeling: now I understand what people experience"). However, on reflection, or theoretically, she does not seem to be able to assimilate or locate this experience. All she remembers is the knowledge that she had been emotionally affected as never before ("Although I can't locate it at all or um put a name to it or describe it, but it was/ it didn't/ it had never affected me in that way before"). [62]

In the following sequence Ms. Schiller speaks about the external and internal signs and the associated sensations and about Ole NYDAHL's identification of the external signs.

"Um and then a few things really dissolved. There was a bit this feeling I don't belong, and that slowly went away and with this Phowa that's how it is, there is also this external sign, I don't know to what extent you are into it, this, this, like, a place on your head opens up and before I also, that's rubbish (laughs a little), you know, and um I did (chuckling) actually feel something like that during this meditation/ although I would never, one never knows what that, what it is exactly. But um and then/ Ole then examines people's heads and the others too, I've never seen them do it myself, but apparently it was I also have the feeling that, yes, I can feel something, like a kind of wound, but um of course it's this idea that but apparently that, perhaps I am simply too rational, in the end your mind finally shoots out and opens something there/ but apparently I did have something. And something very distinct, even. And um I did have to think about that. Like what, what is that and, and perhaps this/ there IS in fact something in it, in this transcendental level, transcendent level." [63]

On a phenomenal level it is mainly the change in her own feelings that seems to be clear to Ms. Schiller, which is associated with a change in her structures of relevance. Before she had had the feeling that she did not really belong, but this feeling of exclusion disappeared as she continued to practise ("a bit this feeling: I don't belong and then it slowly went away"). This new, altered feeling of belonging is highly significant for Ms. Schiller, particularly in view of her life history that she explains elsewhere in the interview.³³ For her it is in fact thus clear that something significant has happened during this course. [64]

What she says about the outward signs is also interesting. The Lama examines the participants' heads and identifies the signs. However, Ms. Schiller has never seen such a sign herself. She thus has no choice but to believe the Lama. Since

33 Since Ms. Schiller was living in a same-sex relationship in which she had concentrated exclusively on her partner, the feeling that she now (finally) also belonged to a larger social environment and was part of an "exciting" community was in a sense new.

the Lama's assessment is not based on sensory evidence, but on communication, the sign is not validated by the absolute immediacy of phenomenal experience. On the one hand she feels something that can be associated with the external sign ("... yes, I can feel something, like a kind of wound ..."), but on the other she still has doubts as to whether she has not simply imagined it ("... perhaps I am simply too rational ...") and then switches to the interpretation that apparently something special has happened ("... but apparently I did have something ..."). [65]

In regard to the question under investigation in this article it is precisely this ambivalence that is significant. The link between internal and external signs claimed by the Lama remains subject to doubt and as someone who has been socialised by rational, scientific modes of thinking Ms. Schiller accordingly oscillates between two interpretations, which in turn prompts further processes of reflection and allows the magical causality of the transfer of consciousness to become at least conceivable ("perhaps this/ there IS in fact something in it, in this transcendental level, transcendent level"). [66]

Ultimately, however, only the internal experience of the strong feeling of belonging remained clear, like the practice of the meditation exercise itself—for example, chanting the mantras, and the group atmosphere that went along with it. Through these two things the Tibetan meditation practice generates a pre-reflective sense of proof. Some of the interpretations offered by Tibetan Buddhism can then take these experiences as a starting point, although this takes the form of a cognitive process that oscillates between belief and doubt. On a rational level doubtful thoughts may still arise, but on the level of felt practice the connection between the sign, the Lama's communication and the felt experience remains convincing. Thus "doing religion" leads to an initial certainty. For Ms. Schiller, participating in a Phowa course was associated with some initial changes in the way she related to herself and the world. [67]

To begin with, Ms. Schiller found both the physical process of the practice and the lack of room in the community that she was forced to be with problematic. Here the practice is initially mainly oriented towards the form of an I-Thou relationship, on the one hand the relationship to her partner and on the other that to the Lama who guides and models the practice. In contrast, at the end there is the community-building in the sense of a positively emotionally charged I-we relationship. Here the collective performance of the rituals and the associated reflection on a community to which Ms. Schiller now feels herself to belong merge into a single unit. However, this has little connection to the cosmology of Tibetan Buddhism and the figures of reflection associated with it. While the process does temporarily lead to an adjustment in the sense of a new way of relating to herself and the world (for Ms. Schiller this is the feeling that she is part of the community during the course), it does not result in a religious socialisation on the ontological level, i.e., it does not change the way in which she relates to the world. Tibetan Buddhism and its interpretations remain foreign and external to Ms. Schiller. [68]

4.3 Transformation

At the time of the interview Miriam Kraft was 55 years old. Twenty years before she had turned to Tibetan Buddhism after gaining some experience with meditation, including participation in a Zen group. She turned to the Diamond Way when her mother developed a fatal illness. She had been unable to find satisfactory answers to her new religious needs in the austere philosophy of Zen. Whereas Zen Buddhism generally remains agnostic in such situations and relies on the clarity of the present moment in life, Tibetan Buddhism has the "Tibetan Book of the Dead" (THURMAN, 1994), the key text of Tantric Buddhism³⁴ which offers a religious interpretation in the form of a map of the afterlife (Ole NYDAHL's Phowa courses on "conscious dying" thus aroused Ms. Kraft's interest). As she talked about it, in retrospect the course itself seemed to her to be a "brilliant method" for "coping with it, particularly practically". Note that here the word "practical" points towards a pragmatic perspective, in contrast to validity claims that are justified theoretically or by argumentation, since Ms. Kraft wanted to be able to do something in her confrontation with death. Retrospectively she saw learning Tibetan Buddhism as a lengthy "path or process", but after her first course she had made a "start", particularly in an emotional sense. She found Lama Ole NYDAHL "highly inspired" and also took "refuge" in the Diamond Way in a formal sense. [69]

The following narratives about first Phowa courses are interesting particularly because differences in the experience of time are linked in a way that can give insight into how experience and reflection interact reciprocally to produce an experience of conviction in the sense of coherence of beliefs which finally result in a long-term spiritual practice over many years and a commitment to Diamond Way Buddhism. [70]

In what follows we shall therefore focus in more detail on all those parts of the interview in which Ms. Kraft spoke about her Phowa practice. To start with she drew attention to a certain connection between her Phowa practice and a specific pattern of physical sensations. She said that this link was also reactivated in the interview situation.

"Yes. That is/ You feel that too. That is, you feel that when you have the Phowa, you feel, it is sometimes a feeling of as if ants were running around on your head. That is precisely at that spot. Or when that, a little, sometimes you get a little one. I am aware of that now too as I talk about it, funnily enough, it's like, yes, a feeling like a tingling or ants [running] over. And it's a highly sensitive spot. Also when you sometimes run your hand or your/ across it or sometimes like/ So for me, I can say that it feels a small, thin piece of skin. But when I press on it nothing happens." [71]

To start with the tingling at what is thought to be the point of emergence of consciousness occurs as a sensory sign. There appears to be a "highly sensitive spot", which, however, strangely does not react particularly sensitively to touch

³⁴ Tantra is a school of Indian philosophy or spirituality that is oriented towards yoga practices and has had a marked influence on Tibetan Buddhism. For an introduction see ELIADE (1990 [1969]).

from outside ("when I press on it nothing happens"). The discrepancy between the perceived sensitivity and the lack of any particular sensitivity to touch can probably best be explained by the fact that the phenomenon described is suggestion or, experienced retrospectively, autosuggestion which reproduces the experience evoked in the Phowa meditation without inducing visible physiological signs. Nonetheless, this connection is apparent on the level of the level of phenomenal experience. That suggestions can be anchored after a long enough practice phase is nothing unusual—one only needs to think of Autogenic Training —, but a phenomenon that is well known from research on hypnosis.³⁵ [72]

But how does a link arise between these sensations and the interpretations of Tibetan Buddhism, the metaphysical implications of which are both foreign and challenging to persons with a Western socialisation? Ms. Kraft reported that she had already read a few texts about Tibetan Buddhism before she went on the course, but that the practice had initially seemed foreign to her, as she did not know the Buddha to whom the mantras referred. However, she added that during the course a lot had happened for her on the feeling and sensation level and that Lama Ole NYDAHL's guidance had played an important role in this.

"And nor was I/ And I wasn't yet so/ I wasn't yet settled. I wasn't yet so/ I found it all fascinating, I already knew quite a lot about Buddhism theoretically. I also read a lot, from different orientations. [...] But all that was more head stuff. And the other was then the practice. That was the practical side. And then I wasn't yet quite/ What am I actually doing there? I was somehow chanting mantras to a Buddha that I actually somehow don't really know. At that point I wasn't yet so, in the preparation I wasn't at all clear. I did it but I can't say that I was really, how can I put it, that it made much sense [literal translation. 'did not have hand and foot']. That only came when I had got to know Lama Ole and when I had done this Phowa and suddenly thought, whoops, and that was/ that was really strenuous and you don't always feel good. I had a lot of headaches. And a lot of people do. It's/ Energetically a lot happens. A lot of people don't feel good. Ole says stored/ many, many feelings come up out of storehouse consciousness. It's no cakewalk. (Laughs) [...] And you have to do it in a protected environment, that's why it's done in these courses. We don't do it somewhere in a field, but only in contact with our Lama. So that's also a [form of] protection that is in place." [73]

In this section to start with Ms. Kraft searched for words to describe her overall state before and during the course. She decided on "not settled", which can be understood on the one hand as not steady or not yet organised, or on the other in the sense that at the time she did not yet have a spiritual home in terms of having committed to a group and doctrine. In other words, she was still searching. In addition—as shown by her subsequent explanations—the theory and practice still seem to have been separate and disconnected for her. She found the metaphysical concepts of Tibetan Buddhism "enormously" impressive, but to start with they remained "head stuff". Similarly, she initially found the practice of Tibetan Buddhism disconnected ("... somehow chanting mantras to a Buddha

35 For an introduction to research on hypnosis see LYNN and RHUE (1991) and NASH and BARNIER (2012).

that I actually somehow don't really know"). She performed the exercises, "did" them somehow, but was not at first sure whether that "made sense". In German, Ms. Kraft employs a metaphor. The metaphor of "hand and foot" could be understood as an indication that Ms. Kraft has not yet incorporated the teachings and is therefore not yet able to link the Buddhist concepts with her own embodied knowledge. [74]

The question arises as to what characteristics a practice would have had forged a link for Ms. Kraft. It became clear that this practice is strenuous and associated with pain ("it was really strenuous", "had a lot of headaches"). It is also accompanied by emotional turmoil ("energetically a lot happens"). Here Ms. Kraft was borrowing her terminology from physics, using metaphors of energy. She thus drew an analogy between objective processes (energy flows) and her subjective experience of emotional processes, lending these processes an objective character. It is clear that this is hard work ("it's no cakewalk"). [75]

However, at this juncture it is striking that the interpretative frame that makes it possible to link the work with the psychological processes that are experienced was apparently not self-evident for Ms. Kraft and that she still needed the mediation of a third person. While she saw the emotional processes that were full of energy as fact, she felt that the knowledge about the meaning of these emotions is passed on by communication, since only when the Lama interprets what happens in terms of the doctrine of karma³⁶ of Tibetan Buddhism ("Ole says [...] many feelings come up out of storehouse consciousness") does this appear meaningful in the context of the Phowa course. [76]

The setting of the course simply ensures that something is experienced. However, at the same time there is a contingency with what is experienced. On the one hand the interpretative context of the "storehouse consciousness" provided by the Lama seems so abstract that it would be possible to integrate almost any psychological content. On the other hand the setting is organised in such a way that the participants go through a process that is as impressive as it is intense—simply because it is serious work that requires an effort—and it is this alone that ensures that the students will perceive and feel something special, if they allow themselves to become involved in it as a whole. [77]

The uncertainty or the adventure, if you will, as regards what the participants experience during the course is, in turn, stabilised by the strict ritualised format of the course. From the perspective of practice theory the mantras thus do not protect the practitioners because the words that are pronounced possess an inherent transcendental power, but because all ritualised activities carried out under the instruction of the "ritual master" create that frame in which anything—including crises—can be experienced and endured ("So that's also a [form of] protection that is in place"). [78]

³⁶ According to the Buddhist doctrine of consciousness (Sanskrit: *Vijnanavada*) storage consciousness collects all the experiences of a living being and is thus the basis for both that being's current existence and for all future existences or rebirths. Following the Buddhist doctrine of karma all actions carried out and experiences therefore have a direct effect on future actions and experiences.

The following interview sequence informs us about how such rituals and personal experiences can be linked together productively in a concrete process. To begin with it is the physical torments associated with the intensive Phowa exercise that are in the foreground, but then also for Ms. Kraft the inner psychological confrontation with the death and dying of her mother. The following interview excerpt also provides us with some insight into the interdependency between practice and theory.

Miriam Kraft: "Well, physically I felt really bad. I simply had terrible headaches."

Interviewer: "Right from the start?"

Miriam Kraft: "Yes. Relatively soon. A lot of headaches and I found it terribly strenuous. I can't find a better way of saying it, but I wasn't used to it, either. That is, I wasn't used to sitting three times a day. I have to say that. But I noticed, yes, that there's something there. It was a certain, but perhaps it was also this spirit of group pressure. And somehow the whole time I had this feeling, that is, (...) it is relatively compli/ Yes, it's not complicated, it's a bit crazy because I knew that at the moment when she died I was closely connected to my mother. I saw that in that moment, noticed it. I was connected to her on an energetic level."

Interviewer: "Not physically?"

Miriam Kraft: "No. I saw the time of death and so on. That was in fact something out of the ordinary. I haven't actually been able really to get to the bottom of it on a head level and with my (not clear). I found that great, besides the fact that I was of course sad, but I was so deeply connected to her energetically that it gave me a lot of strength, that I believed in something like there's something else that you can't grasp. And it was that that actually kept me going. This is the first time I've talked about it. // Because I find the question intriguing just now. That's it. And then I thought if that/ if that, even if it hurts so much and is so strenuous and you head hurts so much and your behind and you no longer know how you want to sit or if at all, if then/ if then obviously, and we were given an introduction and in the evening there were always questions and answers. So there was also intellectual support for the sessions, I thought if you had such a deep energetic connection to your mother at the time of her death and you supported her that/ on her way, and although she was a Christian and I knew she would go to heav/ would be fetched, in her imagination, then you have the strength to do this practice. And that did support me. It did in fact keep me going during those da/ through that time. And actually the whole time during the Phowa I didn't think that I was doing it for myself. I was simply doing it and that was it and then/ that came later. That came during the second and third Phowa when I simply noticed that it is also an enormous quality for me. That is, for my/ for my/ Yes, living and dying, I don't know. Can (not clear) and can be dead and no idea. And then that was/ That then totally/ Had a quite different/ Quite different feel to it. But for those four days that was the strength that I was somehow absolutely convinced that, yes, that it must have some kind of meaning, but I didn't yet know what meaning." [79]

Ms. Kraft began by describing the difficulties with which she was confronted during the first few days of the course. She also, using an idiosyncratic neologism—"Gruppenzwanggeist" (group pressure spirit)—, drew attention to a ritualised dynamic from she was unable to withdraw. At the same time she went through an

intensive inner experiential process: the relationship to her deceased mother ("I was connected to her on an energetic level"). Her response to the interviewer showed that she did not mean a physical or objective connection, but rather the associated emotions and ideas. Thus Ms. Kraft did not draw a conclusion by analogy, equating inside with outside and psyche with physics, but instead she subscribes to a metaphysics that is in a sense realistic and sustains the distinction between subject and object. [80]

What is noteworthy in this context is how precisely and in what exact terms Ms. Kraft was able to differentiate between different forms of knowing and believing at this point in her interview. On the one hand she knew that her emotional connection to her mother was a reality and she was also aware of the connection, knew that it was precisely this relationship that gave her the strength to do the exercises of the Phowa course with the intensity and surrender shown by the Lama. On the other hand she said that it was this that gave her the "strength" to believe in a transcendent dimension in the first place ("but I was so deeply connected to her energetically that it gave me a lot of strength that I believed in something like there's something else that you can't grasp"). [81]

The word "belief" in itself denotes a difference from knowing, which is why it is significant that Ms. Kraft chose to use this word herself. If we equate her emotional strength with strength of will we might say, as did William JAMES, that Ms. Kraft decided that she wanted to believe.³⁷ Interestingly, in this report it was not yet the metaphysical concepts of Tibetan Buddhism, but the ideas of Christian spirituality that gave Ms. Kraft solace ("she was a Christian and I knew she would go to heav/ would be fetched, in her imagination, then you have the strength to do this practice. And that did support me"). [82]

As described by DEWEY (1986 [1934], Chapter II.7) here the religious quality of experience did not arise due to the conceptual or theoretical consistency of a certain religious idea, but on the basis of a quality of experience that turns the will towards belief without the belief first having been acquired reflectively in the form of meaning, let alone systematically elaborated. Once again Ms. Kraft managed to express this relationship of reflection, which at first appears to be paradoxical, very precisely ("But for those four days that was the strength that I was somehow absolutely convinced that, yes, that it must have some kind of meaning, but I didn't yet know what meaning"). [83]

Here the Tibetan cosmology, according to which in the Phowa exercise consciousness is "ejected" out to the Amitābha Buddha, also takes effect through abstract concepts to which Ms. Kraft has not really committed herself. For Ms. Kraft the only source of support is her emotional strength, which is fuelled by her deep grief, and her desire to invent a healing relationship, both with herself and with the world (which she thinks of as a concrete reactualisation of her relationship to her deceased mother). [84]

37 This is a reference to JAMES' essay "The Will to Believe" (1896).

Only in retrospect and after attending further Phowa courses does Ms. Kraft acquire a more reflective and theoretical understanding of the Tibetan Buddhist doctrine and does this begin to have meaning for her. This meaning is that she gained an idea of her own "living and dying" where previously she had had "no idea". What she has since grasped through reflection lends her practice a "quite different feel" in that first course. However, this additional dimension consists much less in a more precise theoretical and conceptual understanding of metaphysical questions than in an understanding of what Tibetan Buddhism could mean for the way she lives her life ("I simply noticed that that is also an enormous quality for me"). It seems that having an idea is enough, since more reflection could undermine her practice. In order to practice it is necessary, at least at some points, to block reflection. The light of doubt would all too rapidly cause the numinous ("something else that you can't grasp") to lose its radiance. [85]

As described above, signs of successful execution of the Phowa meditation that are perceivable both outwardly and inwardly appear. Let us take a look at another interview sequence in which it becomes clear in what form these signs were revealed to Ms. Kraft.

"And that comes on about the third day. For me, at least. That was when I had the feeling that, wow, now something's shooting through that, yes, that you could in fact call a flash. That fits. The word fits. And it's also possible that it was already open. We do the check or our Lama does the check after four days. But we are also/ We're told if at all possible not to wash our hair and that's clear. Because it/ sometimes there's only a bit of scurf or something like that. And he's super, super/ He and his wife are really exact and check 2,000 heads or 2,500 heads extremely minutely. We can join in, too. In the summer he usually does it outside. And that, I think, in my case perhaps after the third day, don't know. But it's good, yes, it comes together." [86]

To start with Ms. Kraft described the phenomenal quality of her inner experience. She reported that she had the "feeling" that something was "shooting through" that "could in fact be described as a flash". However, it becomes clear that epistemically Ms. Kraft was uncertain whether her subjective experience was associated with a real opening in her skull. She thought it was possible, but it had not been checked or proved ("it's also possible that it was already open"). The only verification took place one day later when Ole NYDAHL and his wife Hannah went round checking. The interview shows that it is by no means always striking phenomena that are identified as external signs, but that they are often only "a bit of scurf" on the skin. [87]

Among the many interviews conducted with interviewees from the Diamond Way school there is only one in which a course participant explicitly described how she saw the above-mentioned drop of blood on the head of another student, who was bald. While all the other students reported that they were checked and found to have the signs deemed to show their success, these signs were not as spectacular. Thus sensational signs would appear to be rather the exception than the rule during Phowa courses. [88]

On the other hand we know from research on hypnosis that in persons with certain personality characteristics the appearance of religious stigmata can be induced by suggestion. There are a few cases in which the scars of Jesus Christ and even real bleeding and wounds have been reproduced by hypnosis. However, research has also shown that the sites of the bleeding and the characteristics of the stigmata are determined solely by the type of mental image employed, i.e., that they are not so much characteristics of a higher symbolic reality that are independent of the situation than they are products of the mode of suggestion employed.³⁸ [89]

If stigmata can arise in Christian religious contexts why should this not also occur in the Tibetan context, particularly since in this case the practitioners develop a high level of identification with the images suggested by the exercises they do? If this were so, it would not be necessary to doubt the truth content of such reports per se, but rather we should by all means expect impressive signs such as bleeding or the spontaneous appearance of wounds to occur in individual cases, which would, however, probably be quite rare.³⁹ [90]

However, Ms. Kraft and most of the other students interviewed did not experience any dramatic signs, but "only" the connection between an intensive subjective experience that can be interpreted as a breakthrough and the signs examined and confirmed by the teachers that are rather unspectacular in nature and may even appear insignificant to external observers. [91]

Together with the basic theory that spectacular signs can occur (and do presumably arise in isolated cases during a course), for Ms. Kraft and a number of other interviewees the teachers' confirmation is sufficient to convert their doubt into conviction. At this point attention should be drawn to the price that would have to be paid if strong doubts were to be sustained. One would have to assume either that the teachers only pretend to find the signs, i.e., that they consciously lie to the students, or that they are subject to self-deception since they identify characteristics as signs that cannot be seen as an indication of the streaming out of consciousness during Phowa and thus as proof of the success of the exercise. However, in view of the interviewed students' deep trust in the teachers' competence, which developed in the course of the intensive exercises, and the fact that sustaining the doubt would be inconsistent with their subjective experience, it would seem unlikely that these interpretations are correct. Moreover, as a rule marked changes in self-perception arise and are maintained throughout the Phowa course. In addition, it would mean contradicting the opinions of a group of people who take the occurrence of such signs for granted. [92]

38 For more on the phenomenology of stigmata, their induction by hypnosis and the psychological and psychopathological personality characteristics of individuals who are especially susceptible to suggestion see WILSON (1988).

39 These psychosomatic phenomena have a special fascination, not only for persons receptive to religious imagery. At least, this shows the extent to which physiological processes can be influenced by imagination.

Let us take a look at an interview sequence that can give us more insight into the important relationship between experience and reflection.

"The splitting headache, that was like a tension that arose in my scalp. And then it disappeared and didn't come back, but it was still, well, okay, what is that? (Laughs). That was all still so, huh? And it tingled the whole time and we, a lot of laughing then. And we [laughed] a lot/ I laughed a lot. Didn't of course know that laughter is perhaps also happiness, but somehow I (laughs) (laughing) sometimes that had a mixture of/ you judge it so fast. That's back and then he always immediately adds another concept. I say what are we still doing here. Now we are continuing to write (not clear). It's always that sound. And actually/ It does work/ everything was fine and then a lot of/ I've got a lot of light. I am bathed in light. I saw a lot of light." [93]

Again in this sequence it is clear that Ms. Kraft experienced some striking changes in her sensory experiencing. First her "splitting headaches" were in the foreground. She locates the "tension" that "arose" in her "scalp". Then the tension dissolved and with it her pain ("and [it] didn't come back"). However, she maintained the attention that she directed towards her scalp in the Phowa exercise, but now with a different pattern of sensations ("and it tingled the whole time"). Ms. Kraft also experienced inner light phenomena in the practice ("saw a lot of light"). [94]

Ms. Kraft described her inner flow experience during the last third of the process of the Phowa meditation as having undergone a significant change. The emotional effect seems to have been so strong that the associated patterns of sensation were reproduced in the interview situation. Here, too, Ms. Kraft starts to laugh, just as she felt the "tingling" in some other narrative sequences. [95]

If we understand her spontaneous laughter as a form of communication that is an attempt to convey something on a pre-reflective level which has not yet been assimilated on the level of reflection, the narrative is indicative of an initiation to the direct overcoming of a painful and strenuous life situation, without the person yet being aware of what she has been through and what it means for her personally. This might be compared to a person who begins to laugh uncontrollably after completing a long and stressful examination. [96]

Interestingly, at this point Ms. Kraft again commented on her lack of reflection at the time and the associated difference from what she knows now ("Didn't of course know that laughter is perhaps also happiness"). Within the interpretative framework of Diamond Way Buddhism success in transferring one's own consciousness into the Buddha Amitābha is equated with entering into a field of "pure bliss" or "highest joy" (NYDAHL, 1996). According to the theory, entry into this "Buddha field" is indicated by light phenomena that accompany the visualisation. However at the time of her first Phowa course Ms. Kraft did not know anything about these concepts or had not yet internalised them. She was therefore not yet able to connect her experience, which occurred towards the end of the course, with "happiness". This interpretation only becomes possible as an emotional and cognitive connection between laughing and bliss as she gives her

retrospective description of the ways of thinking of Tibetan Buddhism, which she has now internalised. As a result the impressive experiences she had during the course once again became more significant. Thus the circle is closed: individual factors combined with the setting of the course to produce an experience that had a strong influence on her spiritual history. [97]

After the end of the Phowa course various aspects combined to form an arrangement which successfully completed Ms. Kraft's initiation:

- the physical meditation practice, which was manifested in hard work and confrontation,
- the emotional strength she needed to find to continue believing in the persisting presence of her mother's spirit as she was dying,
- the dimension of transcendence that she expressed in negative terms, i.e., through which her mother appeared to be not dead, but still present
- the evocation of subjective experiences which the spiritual interpretations can follow on from, and finally
- the charismatic teacher who was able to put over the interpretations. [98]

Taken together with the "group pressure spirit" of the community, all this led to a (new) practice that brought her substantial gains in spiritual meaning. [99]

Accordingly the Phowa course can be considered to have been literally an initiation in to Tibetan Buddhism. As with any initiation process, first the body was conquered and absorbed into the community, and then the interpretation followed in concert with existing or newly acquired meanings. What happens is only assimilated much later—if at all—by reflecting on the process itself. (Ritualised) Initiations frequently tend rather to be characterised by a barrier to reflective communication.⁴⁰ [100]

This could also explain the slight discrepancy that appeared in this interview sequence where Ms. Kraft noted that laughing only "perhaps" means happiness. Just as she could not be completely certain whether her skull was really opened, she was not able to transform this connection into absolute certainty. Belief is not knowledge and thus a crumb of epistemic doubt remains. Religion and science are two different spheres of reflection also for Ms. Kraft, thus in this sense she remains modern. The initiation was nonetheless successful because she did not need knowledge, only that belief that she felt to be evidence. The meaning of her experience in the process of dealing with her grief at her mother's death became so powerful that from then onwards Tibetan Buddhism was her spiritual home. Her practice, the group, her experiencing and the interpretative frame conveyed by the teachers became increasingly coextensive. [101]

To put it in abstract terms, Ms. Kraft's conversion to Tibetan Buddhism as a specific arrangement that was mainly supported by the I-Thou relationship between her and her deceased mother, was successful. It was the felt spirit of

40 For more on the embodiment of initiation rituals see BOYER (2001, pp.290ff.).

her mother that generated the emotional strength she needed to link the "group pressure spirit" with the perspectives for reflection offered by Tibetan Buddhism. As a result the transcendent sphere of the Buddha Amitābha no longer appears as a fiction, but develops its own potency within the practice and appears as "light". [102]

At the same time this arrangement uses the Buddhist notion of salvation which is expressed in terms of negative logic, i.e., it conceives of death not merely as the negation of being—that is, the annihilation of consciousness—but constructs it as a negation of being and non-being as alternatives, or, to put it in positive terms, as a transcendent space that encompasses both. Only from this perspective can Ms. Kraft's mother be seen as present after death, even if in the world of the living she appears "only" as an imagined form. If this is possible, then by analogy we can conceive of an arrangement in which the Buddha, who is equally inaccessible in the logic of being, can be experienced in the present as happiness—provided that with time the students learn that they can also see and feel their own experiences (and be it only mundane "laughter") in this way. [103]

Thus rationality—and with it the associated possibility of doubt—is not suspended, but shifted to a different place that does not threaten the stability of the felt spiritual practice. In such an arrangement belief and science can coexist without having to call each other into question. To echo DEWEY (1986 [1934], p.14), it becomes possible to integrate the "shifting scenes [...] into that imaginative totality we call the Universe", i.e., a satisfying mode of relating to oneself and the world. [104]

4.4 "Mastery"

Finally, we turn our attention to a few sequences from an interview with Lama Ole NYDAHL, the teacher who led the above-mentioned Phowa courses, in order to find out how the sensory signs and the perspectives of reflection are linked. Ole NYDAHL began by presenting his status as expert by talking about his role as teacher and the effect of the successful execution of the exercises of Tibetan Buddhism.

"For death I am/ I am the expert [for] death. I have probably taught a hundred—they've calculated—worked it out: a hundred and twenty thousand people conscious dying [...] That's called Phowa and then you learn, you meditate on the red Buddha of highest joy⁴¹ above your/ and then you push your consciousness (makes a noise) through your skull and then people have holes in their heads. I have myself/ I was once checked, up in Hamburg, or in Hamburg because people⁴² wanted to see what meditation does. [...] Magnetic resonance [...] Yes, yes, he [the radiologist doing the

41 Both the red form of *Tschenresig* (in the iconography of tantric Buddhism the embodiment of the compassionate aspect of the Buddha), which is called *Gyalwa Gyamtso* (Tibetan, the all-powerful ocean) and *khoro demchog* (Tibetan, "highest joy") are particularly important main deities of the *Karma Kaygu* line of Tibetan Buddhism.

42 Here in the interview Ole NYDAHL is referring to a medical examination which we have not yet been able to verify independently.

examination] wanted to know that. And then (amused) they found seven holes in my head. From Phowa, from throwing consciousness upwards." [105]

In the above context on the one hand the reference to the Lama's immense teaching and practice experience ("taught [...] a hundred and twenty thousand people conscious dying") would seem important, and on the other the reference to the external signs as proof. The holes in the heads of practitioners have also been confirmed by a third party, i.e., from the perspective of an objectifying medical examination. These signs are to be seen as an indication of a metaphysical causal nexus that is associated with the Phowa practice ("from throwing consciousness upwards"). As social scientists we must refrain from judging whether this causal connection is correct or not.⁴³ However, this does not prevent us from assuming, as we have with the other interviews, that for NYDAHL by bracketing the validity aspect (MANNHEIM, 1982 [1936], p.80), the self-evidence pertains not only to the signs on the skull, but that it also applies to the metaphysical implications associated with Tibetan Buddhism ("For death I am/ I am the expert for death?"). [106]

In the following interview excerpt Ole NYDAHL described, with a few specific details, how he also produces this proof for himself as he is teaching the Phowa exercise.

Ole NYDAHL: "Yes. I pull it up, of course, of course, you/"

Interviewer: "You⁴⁴ not only give instructions, but go through exactly the same state."

Ole NYDAHL: "Without that it's not the Diamond Way. Then it's just an intellectual explanation. No, no, must (claps his hands) do it myself and then it comes.

(Interviewer: "Yes") Yes, yes, you have to do that, it's necessary. And I had such fantastic teachers, the first reborn Lama of Tibet, Karmapa⁴⁵, our main teacher. He/ he was the sixteenth Karmapa was Han/ the main teacher of my wife and myself. Now we have the seventeenth and we have a lot of competent teachers and so on. Yes, REALLY, Hannah and I were in the Himalayas for four years. Four, four years, yes. From sixty-eight to seventy-two we were in the Himalayas and learned to meditate and [...] you get a hole in your head. [...] It's a breathing and you inv-, you awaken an energy field. Both inside and outside. And it's that that pulls. It arises, the awareness. You send it up step by step up to your skull and then with a (makes a noise) you go up. And after a while people start to get headaches and within a few days. That/ now I'll take a bit more time, but let's say three to four days they all have a hole in their heads. We go to them and you can touch and there's a drop, a drop of blood or you touch it very lightly and they are very sensitive (Interviewer: "Yes") and

43 As social scientists we have neither the medical or psychological (e.g., psychosomatic) nor the spiritual competence required to arrive at an assessment. We fall back on the attitude of methodological agnosticism in which we take the statements of the actors interviewed seriously as the expression of specific modes of relating to perspectives of reflection.

44 Although the interviewer and Ole NYDAHL met for the first time at the interview, Ole NYDAHL immediately suggested using the familiar form of "you" in German ("Du").

45 By tradition the Karmapa is the highest lineage holder of the Karma-Kagyü school. It is currently being debated who is to be officially recognised as the rightful successor to the 17th Karmapa.

then it STAYS afterwards. It never goes away. (Interviewer: "And er er") The connection that you have, this energetic connection through the body, that stays."

Interviewer: "So to experience that, if you"

Ole NYDAHL: "Yes, that's it, that is/ you REALLY start, that that is the greatest gift" [107]

Here again we see in detail that the Phowa exercise is a body-oriented practice in which concepts, visualisations and certain yogic breathing exercises are linked together in a specific way. The Lama also mentions the authority of the traditional lineage: none less than the highest lineage holder of the Karma-Kagyü tradition—the 16th Karmapa—and states he was also trained by other "competent" teachers from the tradition. In a similar way to the students Vera Schiller and Miriam Kraft, who only felt the exercise and grasped its metaphysical meaning when they practised in the community, Ole NYDAHL and his wife were also actively involved in a lineage which lent meaning to what they learned. [108]

And what is the meaning that gives Ole NYDAHL his motivation? To examine this question we look, finally, at another, very "thick" interview sequence in which he still euphorically reports a particularly intense past experience, describing how he performed the Phowa practice for a student who had died, although at the time he himself was in hospital after a serious accident.

Interviewer: "And er when you do that it is an inner joy or something like that (Ole NYDAHL: "Yes, yes") when you have got there. That is Amitābha? (Ole NYDAHL, speaking simultaneously: "Yes, yes, that's Amitābha")"

Ole NYDAHL: "ENORMOUS joy. ENORMOUS joy. That, if you get THAT, that is the greatest gift."

Interviewer: "And that is simply a state of emptiness? Or, or what? Or of joy, or er presence, or how can one describe it?"

Ole NYDAHL: "One of enormous blissfulness, and then "bang", it was all there, I was I was INSIDE the Buddha. When I had my, my accident, I was FULLY, FULLY in him and/ and then [...] and then I did it. Then I, then I went out with him, I delivered him.⁴⁶ And then the blissfulness was so great, some of the time I was not fully conscious and then when I was, then I was at the Buddha's right hand and I thought: A- and I saw a, the same profile as, as Sharmapa actually.⁴⁷ [...] Yes, yes. And a knobbly nose and everything and he was/ and then I said, 'Yes', hm then I wanted to see what the situation was. Then I was out of him, then I had seen the whole area and because my mind [is] mainly protector protection/ (Interviewer: Hm-hm, hm-hm), like that, really. What needs to be protected here? Um then um"

Interviewer: "And you see that all very clearly [...]"

Ole NYDAHL: "Yes-yes, I see it completely, I see there; yes, haha: There's an (unintelligible) there is a corner, there, if something happens, one could do that,

46 Ole NYDAHL was reporting how while he was in hospital he did Phowa for a friend who had died. He recounted how he and this friend got through to the Buddha and "delivered" him [the friend], but he himself then returned to the world of immanence. For a more detailed version of this story see NYDAHL und HARTUNG (2011).

47 The Sharmapa is considered to be an emanation of the Buddha Amitābha. He is the second highest Lama of the Karma-Kagyü lineage after the Karmapa.

couldn't one? And so on, and the result was that I was then out of the red Buddha. Then I knew I must come back. I couldn't stay up there. I/ Hannah was there, Caty⁴⁸ was there, all of us, the work was there. But then I went round and the last thing I saw on the way were the little animals that ate the even smaller ones and germs. And then with this feeling, "Ah, okay", then I went back into my body and then they were sitting on my right and left, Hannah and Caty. To the right and left of me. That was fascinating. It was great. [...]"

Interviewer: "So practically, when you [plural] experience that somebody is there who dies/"

Ole NYDAHL: "Yes, then I get him. Or, or he then er then, actually get in contact. Can you save him, yes, yes, spiritually, or spiritual contact and then send [him] off." [109]

The interviewer first asked about the quality of the experience associated with the Phowa meditation and mentioned the red Buddha Amitābha who is visualised in the meditation. Ole NYDAHL then spoke of the experience of enormous joy and stressed that it is the "greatest gift" if this experience is bestowed upon one. In response to the question as to the specific quality of experience the narrative slipped seamlessly into the description of a concrete experience that the Lama had had while once in hospital. There he appeared to be "one" with the "enormous blissfulness" and suddenly ("bang") experienced himself as right "inside the Buddha". He then began to deliver the deceased student to Buddha, going through alternating states of clear and not so clear consciousness. Overall the scene gives the impression of being highly symbolically charged. [110]

It would seem important above all that as a result of the Buddha's blessings the Lama appeared as an active protector who could do something for his students ("then I did that, then I went out with him, I delivered him"). At the same time he reconnects with his worldly tasks. Thinking of his commitments towards his (living) students and Hannah, his wife, reminded NYDAHL that he could not remain in the ecstasies of Buddha heaven, but must return. He finally made this move and experienced the return to those close to him who were standing at his bedside as pleasant. His imagination of germs and their being consumed by other organisms symbolised the hospital environment and his processing of his own bodily impairment. [111]

In view of this summary of aspects it is not surprising that this particular scene, in which he was able to experience the gift of the Phowa meditation, became a key experience for NYDAHL. In the existential situation of just having had an accident himself, the imagined worlds of Tibetan Buddhism seemed particularly real to him. Here the Phowa visualisation, which he has so profoundly incorporated, helps NYDAHL to link together the level of the abstract concepts of Tibetan Buddhism with the level of his stressful bodily experiences. He has found his purpose in the face of his own physical adversity, that is, to distance himself from himself in order to help others. He also reactualises his relationship with his own teacher, Sharmapa, in order to experience the empowerment to serve others. [112]

48 This is a reference to his former wife Hannah NYDAHL, who died in 2007, and Caty HARTUNG, who was his second partner also while Hannah was still alive and who assumes many of the management tasks in the organisation.

This scene portrays the teacher as master. Here the Phowa meditation is no longer an exercise, but is done as a practice which leads to an arrangement that produces a practitioner who relates to him- or herself and the world in a way that is in line with Tibetan Buddhism. The Mahayana ideal (of contributing to the spiritual progress of other beings) and Tantrism (merging with the projection of one's ideal self via mimetic identification with the authorities of the tradition) come together in the selflessness of this practice. Having experienced the fruit of the "bliss" of which NYDAHL speaks in the interview the practitioner no longer needs to doubt—and transcendence becomes immanent in phenomenal experiencing by being able to serve and love and thus be useful and loved. [113]

We also find a generalised I-Thou relationship, again expressed in abstract terms, which arises every time the Phowa meditation is performed⁴⁹, thereby actualising both its phenomenal evidence and the reality of the mythical worlds of Tibetan Buddhism. To come back to the quotation at the beginning of this article, we can only say that the "innermost private sphere of Thou-subjectivity [is] a space that is just as inaccessible as the mythological dimensions inhabited by heavenly hosts" (GÜNTHER, 1975, pp.61f.). However, rather than do without transcendence, Ole NYDAHL ensconces himself in the imaginary, where the Thou that is not accessible through the logic of being is constituted as reflection and thus opens up a transcendental world that is felt in this life. In the case of Ole NYDAHL the internal signs are also interwoven with the external signs. This is in a sense a naturalisation of transcendence: the images of the skull produced by doctors naturalise transcendence, just as it is manifested by the stigmata found at the examination of the students. What they show or the question as to whether there is a connection between practice, the signs and the signified and if so, in what it consists, appears unimportant in the face of the evidence of the sign. We can see it! Once again the link between the visible sphere of being and the spheres that are per se inaccessible to consciousness and lie beyond the rupture of the contexture (pp.66f.) is accomplished performatively. In this sense in NYDAHL the relationship with the world, worldview, practice and theory coincide. [114]

Thus ultimately we see that what is impossible from the perspective of theoretical reason can only be executed in practice, i.e., the reconnection of transcendence in immanence. Only in this way is it possible to learn to confound certain sensations, images and signs that can only be experienced in this life with transcendence. This result is discussed below. [115]

49 That is, the relationship to the transcendent Buddha, with whom the practitioner then merges in the course of the exercise.

5. Conclusion

This study reconstructs doing religion as a special form of practice in which the practitioner's relationship to him-/herself and the world and the associated perspectives of reflection are linked, each in its own specific way. Initiation through a Phowa course is analysed as an example of how these processes can take place. It also becomes clear that different "arrangements" are possible in which immanence and transcendence on the one hand and doubts and belief on the other can be related to one another. [116]

In the case of Ms. Schiller the feeling of community as a perspective of reflection seems to be the decisive element, while she continues to have doubts about the metaphysical tenets of Tibetan Buddhism. She nonetheless finds a social community that gives her the strength to continue with her practice. [117]

In contrast, in Ms. Kraft's experience her mode of dealing with her mother's death links alterity and transcendence together in an arrangement that renders the metaphysical aspects of Tibetan Buddhism taught by the Lama highly attractive. She manages to allay the doubts that she could continue to have by setting up a barrier to reflection between belief and knowledge and then settling primarily for the phenomenal qualities of the Phowa practice. [118]

Finally, Ole NYDAHL literally embodies the perspective of reflection of Tibetan Buddhism. He emphasises alterity as the true key to the practice. Both by imagining his own teacher as a Buddha and in his assumption of the role of teacher he transcends the I-it relationship by projecting the I into a mediating Thou, which in turn lends his own spiritual practice tremendous credibility. It is here that the actual meaning of the Phowa practice lies, as SEEGERS (2013, p.273) states, and to be able to demonstrate this in everyday life and even at patients' bedsides seems to be the actual proof that NYDAHL has understood what the goal is, i.e., to transcend one's own ego, because it is monocontextural and thus mortal. [119]

Naturally this movement is only possible from the perspective of a self that is able to be aware of all these various relationships with self and world. According to DEWEY (1986 [1934]) these processes are of course imaginative projections fuelled by sources that are not subject to voluntary decisions. The "group pressure spirit" of which Ms. Kraft spoke and a strong attachment to a significant alter ego (think here of Ms. Kraft's deceased mother, for example) are needed to catalyse such a religious or spiritual reorientation. Only on this basis can the idea "of the integration of the shifting scenes of the world into that imaginative totality we call Universe" (pp.14f.) gain strength and plausibility.⁵⁰ [120]

⁵⁰ Seen from the standpoint of a practice theory informed by the logic of reflection the connection between religion and art that DEWEY (1987 [1934]) also assumed seems even clearer. As in the theatre, it depends on the one hand on the arrangement and on the other on the charisma of the actors. (Especially those who are still in the land of the living must be included!). Only if the combination is successful does the play appear authentic.

However, this universe is—and from the standpoint of the sociology of religion this is probably the most important insight gained from this study—mainly a social one. From the point of view of practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism the typical quality of religious experience (JAMES, 1917 [1901]) is thus only accessible on the basis of a populated universe in which different embodied and unembodied actors (i.e., spirits) enter into relations with each other in specific forms. Only a universe that is populated by both living and no-longer-living beings (since both are epistemically inaccessible) can also host transcendent Buddhas and other centres of divinity (and also evil spirits). [121]

However, this interpretation is not absolute. On the contrary, other interpretations that can be seen as functional equivalents to doing religion are also probable. Thus it must be assumed that other systems of practice both require and make possible other arrangements. Accordingly, further research questions and studies can be derived from this finding.⁵¹ [122]

The differences between the cases presented here can only be inferred from a perspective that is sensitive to centres of reflexivity, subjectivity and prereflexive sociality⁵² as separate logical spaces. Religious practices are not limited to the experience of collectivity and community (Ms. Schiller). If they are to become firmly established they also require a reference in the form of a concrete alterity that creates a bridge to otherness that is inaccessible—since not part of being—(as Ms. Kraft described). [123]

Finally, the movement of self-transcendence through imagining a corresponding I-Thou relationship is completely internalised in the mastery of the teacher. That is, it has become so habitual that, to quote JAMES, it takes on a character "for which spiritual emotions are the habitual centre of the personal energy" (1917 [1901], p.266f.). However, this kind of spirituality or holiness should not be confused with the loss of the practitioners' relationships with themselves and the world—e.g., in a diffuse feeling of being alone. The contrary would appear to be the case. Where no being is to be found (i.e., where there is emptiness) there can be no construction of a connection to the world that is associated with "bliss". Thus Ole NYDAHL's universe is not a lonely one. In the close range there are living and deceased practitioners and teachers and in the distant range an infinite number of other beings that can be associated as required. [124]

The results also have relevance in terms of social theory. That the Diamond Way school is the largest Buddhist group in German-speaking countries in terms of numbers of members and dissemination is probably no coincidence, but attributable to the arrangement that comes into being through the specific form of doing religion. The individual, the group, the outward and inward signs and

51 This functional perspective is elaborated in a more comprehensive publication by VOGD and HARTH (2015) which presents quite different forms of practice that focus less on transcendence or religiousness, but are at least equally as successful and effective from a soteriological point of view.

52 For a praxeological expansion of the pragmatic perspective developed by DEWEY and MEAD see NOHL (2006a).

transcendence appear to come together in a way that is particularly attractive for Western adepts.⁵³ Here we find both a form of spirituality that permits different modes of access and understanding for Western individuals wishing to (re-)find themselves. Above all it offers a soteriologically effective response to crises involving the loss of loved ones who are felt to be both present and not-present and thus opens up the space for other perspectives on transcendence and relationships to oneself and the world.⁵⁴ On the other hand the power of the spirit appears in a naturalised form—one "sees" and "feels" it oneself (or at least that is the narrative). [125]

Finally a brief reflection on the methodological approach and prospects for future research in the science of religion. Conducting contextural analysis informed by practice theory opens up—as the present study has demonstrated—a fruitful approach to an empirical metaphysics which focuses on the question as to how religious conviction develops and in what arrangements it is produced and stabilised. At the same time there is, of course, the question as to which other arrangements are possible under the given conditions. Within the framework of our research project the course that first suggests itself would be to conduct a comparative analysis with other schools of Buddhism present in the West. For instance, in Zen Buddhism there are arrangements of self-transcendence that are also stabilised by body-oriented practices and a prominent teacher-student relationship. However, in contrast to Tibetan Buddhism here it is possible to do without an elaborated religious cosmology or even the idea of rebirth and life after death without giving up the element that is constitutive for doing religion, i.e., bringing transcendence into immanence (cf. VOGD & HARTH 2015, Chapter III). This automatically opens up a number of fruitful prospects for research on other contemporary religious phenomena. [126]

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53 This once more makes it clear that TAYLOR's (2003, pp.101ff.) critique of JAMES remains justified and that we must not forget the institutions that provide the conditions necessary for religious transformation. Without the Phowa course and the organised religion of Tibetan Buddhism there would be no "conscious dying".

54 Or, to quote LATOUR, if we want to "speak of a religious mode" today this is possible especially from the perspective of the "experience of the love crisis", since it is precisely in this context that the space in which "angels" can be discovered who bear the "tumults of the soul" opens up (2013 [2012], pp.295f.).

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