

**Conference Report:**  
**Mind and Life and the Taboo of Spirituality**  
**European Symposium for Contemplative Studies in Berlin**

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From the 10<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> October 2013, the (first) European Symposium for Contemplative Studies took place in Berlin. Scientists from different disciplines like neuropsychology, economics, and pedagogics spoke to nearly 400 participants from 29 countries about the topic “individual and societal change from the contemplative perspective”. The majority of speakers were interested in the second part of this topic, the societal changes and how they could be fostered by elements of contemplative traditions. E.g., buddhologist Rupert Genthin spoke about “Buddhism, life skills, and social subversion”, or Dennis Snower, professor of economics in Kiel (Germany) presented his concept of “Global problem-solving through the voice of care”, asserting that the voice of reason as supposed main motivation of economic behaviour should be replaced by the voice of care (derived from the Buddhist concept of loving-kindness). One main focus was on lectures about the dissemination of meditative techniques in the context of school and education and its effects on clinical psychological parameters. Ilina Singh and Elena Antonova from London’s Kings College and Walter Osika from Stockholm, for example, presented a study about the effects of mindfulness on children with ADHS.

The conference was organized by Mind and Life Europe, founded in 2008, and based in Zurich, Switzerland, as the European branch of Mind and Life Institute, which originated in 1990 from conferences held between scientists and the Dalai Lama, which for the first time took place in 1987 in Dharamsala. The declared aim of the institute is to “promote and support rigorous, multi-disciplinary scientific investigation of the mind which will lead to the development and dissemination of practices that cultivate the mental qualities of attention, emotional balance, kindness, compassion, confidence and happiness” (from the homepage). The institute has fulfilled this task quite well according to some of its affiliates like neuropsychologist Tania Singer. She emphasized that key-

words like compassion or mindfulness appear with an exponential increase as subjects of research in scientific databases in the last fifteen years. The benchmark of all modern science, *Science Magazine*, had recently published an article on her (Singer's) research about the effects of compassion training in the neuroscience section; a long-term study about compassion currently supervised by her had been funded by the European Union; and the amount of press inquiries in her institute concerning this matter had increased up to about 25 a week. One main reason why Eastern contemplative skills could become such a more and more accepted element of Western culture is the fact that meditative techniques and their effects was decontextualized and released from all their religious (mainly Buddhist) implications and thus became a topic of non-ideological science and public discourse. That is, for the most part, the merit of scientists like those affiliated with the Mind and Life Institute, who took into consideration a new paradigm of research, that is, the combination of classical third person perspective (the researcher investigates test persons watching them from outside) with the older and almost abandoned first person perspective (what the test persons report introspectively). Here, especially highly skilled (meditation) experts are of interest. A lot of new knowledge thus has been gained by mutually comparing their inner experiences and the measurable activity of their brains.

Even if this decontextualization has its indisputable benefits, one central question remains open, which is how to interpret research results that have a potentially real impact on Buddhist and other religious world views. One could describe this impact along the frontline of materialist and spiritualist interpretations, although it is much more complex than this. When Michael Persinger in the 1980's put a wired helmet on the skulls of his test persons, it magnetically stimulated their temporal lobes and in some of them produced feelings of a presence, of an invisible force. Vilayanur Ramachandran, who studied the same cerebral region within subjects with epilepsy, called this brain area the "God module" suggesting that religion is a side effect of temporal lobe epilepsy. Even more challenging for Buddhism were scientific investigations like those reported and partially conducted by Andrew Newberg (cf. his book with Eugene d'Aquili (2002): *Why God won't go away*). He saw in meditators a reduced activity of some parts of the temporal lobe and could explain by neurophysiology why this correlated with feelings of unity with the whole universe. The Buddhist concept of non-duality, states like the nirvanic state of (in Tibetan) Rigpa or (in Japanese) Satori thus nowadays after further research can easily be explained as effects of meditation-induced anomalous modulations of brain cells. However, Newberg, in contrast to Persinger/Ramachandran, emphasised that this is just a matter of interpretation. If you see it one way (brain produces effects on the mind) or the other, as

Newberg does (brain is a device constructed to receive that which from a mind-sphere impacts on it), is just a question of taste, a question of your personal worldview, not of scientific facts. Like him, one early neuroscientist, Nobel prize laureate John Eccles, believed strongly in a Christian God and was sure that a dualistic approach must be correct, in which brain and mind are principally separate substances, but interact with each other in the way a pianist plays the piano. Interestingly, scientists who favour such an interpretation open to a spiritual worldview, nowadays seem not to be seen as serious players in the league of real scholarship.

My main interest, as it always is, was therefore directed to the Faustian question “What does spirituality mean for you?”<sup>1</sup> At the beginning of the conference, I had the opportunity to ask this question to Tania Singer, director of the Max-Planck-Institute for Human Cognitive and Brain Science in Leipzig, Germany; Arthur Zajonc, director of the Mind and Life Institute and former professor of physics at Amherst college (USA); Diego Hangartner, director of Mind and Life Europe; and Matthieu Ricard, biologist and Buddhist monk in the Tibetan tradition. The main answer to this question remained on the neutral field of scientific correctness. The data that are gathered by scientists about meditation and its influences on the human brain, behaviour, and inner experience are just data. And nothing else. Scientific data of this kind are correlative and not causal and can neither prove nor refuse the thesis of a mind existing independently from the brain as it is presumed by Buddhism as by all spiritual traditions. That means, they are open to any kind of interpretation, and none of the Mind and Life associates openly favours one over the other. As Arthur Zajonc put it, one of the two great leading figures of the institute (besides the Dalai Lama), neuroscientist Francisco Varela, preferred a phenomenological interpretation, in which data are just phenomena, which should be regarded as such and not serve for theoretical extrapolations beyond their epistemological status. That is a very good point, but it does not take into account that many scientists and the public opinion misuses research results like those of Newberg as arguments *against* a spiritual perspective.

Matthieu Ricard added the Dalai Lama’s position, why he is so keen to promote neuroscientific research on meditation. According to him, Buddhism contains three sections: Buddhist science, practice, and philosophy. Buddhist science deals with the material world and therefore has to be in accordance with natural sciences like neuropsychology. Buddhist practice derives its motivation

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<sup>1</sup> Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Faust I, XVI:  
“Say, as regards religion, how you feel.  
I know that you are a dear, good man,  
Yet, for you, it seems, it has no appeal.”

out of the intention to foster the well-being of all humans, be they Buddhists or not. Meditation techniques are skilful methods to foster the well-being of all (human) beings and, therefore, may not be restricted to the use of Buddhists. The third section of Buddhism, Buddhist philosophy, deals with the interpretation of life, its purpose, and the meaning of not only our daily lives, but also of those phenomena that appear as findings of the sciences. It is the job of metaphysicians like the Buddhist teachers to interpret the data, not that of the scientists. But scientists, as human beings, make metaphysical assumptions, and it could clarify a lot talking about them openly. At least Arthur Zajonc admits that his very personal perspective on the interpretation of these data is a spiritual one.

Scientists engaged in *Life and Mind Institute* are doing a great job in promoting meditation as a major component of a healthy life style for Westerns. It is obvious that they cannot reach the institute's aim to gather scientific competences and to promote contemplative methods by the help of their expertise as a useful tool for humankind, if they ever should interpret their data with a bawdy term like spirituality. By this restriction, they unite scientists with a privately spiritual view, like Arthur Zajonc, scientists that are obviously agnostics without roots in a spiritual world view, like Tania Singer, and openly old fashioned materialists, like her father, Wolf Singer, who says (in the summary of his talk): "All behaviour *results* from dynamic interactions between neurons", thus implicating a causal impact of matter on mind, not a pure correlation. However, by achieving one goal (i.e., spreading interest for meditation issues) out of the fear to lose one's own reputation as "properly thinking scholars" they are easily prone to miss another one, namely to confront the materialist worldview by non-materialist interpretations of phenomena. It has been said a lot of times in this journal and cannot be repeated enough: It is by no means tolerable in an open-minded discourse, that one of two interpretations of scientific observations can be expressed publicly and is seen as totally correct by large scientific and popular audiences, although it is a purely subjective and non-provable belief system becoming an axiom for further research (i.e., the materialist-reductionist interpretation), while another interpretation is tabooed and cannot be mentioned seriously (i. e. the independent-mind, spiritual or spiritualistic perspective).

Of course, Mind and Life promotes meditation research by disseminating the taboo of spirituality in public scientific discourse. The version of meditation that is disseminated here is a predominantly mundane one, for the benefit of all beings, as the Dalai Lama says, including materialists, but not for the benefit of their spiritual well-being what is treated as just inexistent. The problem is not that Buddhist meditation should not be beneficial for those who do not want to buy the Buddhist doctrines (which it is already since Jon Kabat Zinn dissemi-

nated the idea of mindfulness stress reduction and Marsha Linnehan introduced mindfulness to the treatment of Borderline-type persons to a clinical community), but that there is no potential of further development and change of scientific paradigms if the central metaphysical contents of meditation is totally denied. It is not of interest *that* there is a concordance between antique Buddhist teachings and modern scientific findings. It is solely of interest *how* it could be that such scientifically provable thesis were determined by Buddhist experts of mind thousands of years ago with a significant correctness. From this follows something for the possibility of direct accurate world knowledge through mystical modes of consciousness, which could rarely be a main topic of discussion in the mind-life-dialogues.

Tania Singer put it in a nutshell when she said that the only remaining question that could lead beyond the phenomenalist position was, if the mind could have lived before or after this incorporated lifetime. But, as she added, this was not a question open to scientific investigation. I definitely do not agree with that. The point is that science cannot be defined as only one methodological approach in order to gain more or less (and always more or *less!*) secure knowledge about an issue. It might be correct that the kind of science promoted by Mind and Life Institute cannot approach these questions. But if there would be unbiased interest in the results of parapsychological research, for example, the picture would change immediately. Parapsychology, including Near Death Research, has produced a vast amount of reliable quantitative data in the last 100 years, almost totally ignored by the scientific community, and it has gathered whole archives full of single case reports of people that have had subjective experiences that cannot be explained better (if by an unbiased observer!) than by conceding that they have experienced mind far beyond the limits of matter. It is the cowardice or narrow-mindedness of scientists that are not willing to look closely to these phenomena or to talk publicly about it (a point made very clearly by Charles Tart) thus producing the wide-spread misunderstanding that there was no evidence of mind's partial independence from our physical brain (the word "partial" having to be defined, as, for example: within the limits of the bilateral interaction between brain and mind that is working as long as the physical body connected with that mind is working). But that is not the case. Mind can work in ways that matter cannot and produce effects far beyond local biological systems. It is the remaining task of a postmodern science to investigate this impossible possibility and not to ignore it in favour of an old paradigm.