

The Apocalypse of the Self

by Ralph Metzner

An excerpt from [The Unfolding Self](#)



The rebirth phase of the transformation of consciousness may be experienced in several different ways. First, there is *resurrection*, a restoring to life of a personality that has died. Alternatively, rebirth as *self-realization* is the replacement of the small self by the greater Self or Spirit. Third, there is rebirth as *renewal*, where the one who has died, metaphorically, lives thereafter in a world renewed, a heightened state of consciousness. The fourth variant is rebirth experienced as *the birth of the "radiant child"*: this is the archetype of the divine or eternal child, which, as Jung points out, symbolizes "the potential future."⁽¹⁾

Resurrection. The restoration to life of an adult body that has died is described in many mythic and shamanic tales: Osiris is put together again by Isis; the twins Hunter and Jaguar of the Mayan *Popul Vuh* reassemble themselves after being dismembered; shamans who have "died" may be reconstituted by their power animal or ally. Many modern practitioners of shamanic work recount how they were "cut up," "pulverized," "burned," "eviscerated," or otherwise "killed," then reconstructed by their animal helper. While from a skeptical point of view, one could dismiss these as fantasies, we would still have to account for the fact that shamanic practitioners consistently report an enhanced sense of well-being after such experiences.

In the New Testament, the story of Lazarus, as well as that of Jesus himself, exemplifies this kind of physical resurrection. To a certain extent, the modern accounts of near-death experiences (NDEs) coincide with this kind of pattern. In the case of Jesus, the resurrection was into a nonphysical, "spiritual" body that yet resembled the physical in all significant respects, even to having the wounds that the physical body

had suffered. The closest most of us come to this kind of experience is in suffering a near-fatal illness and then recovering—the body appears to be fully restored to health. A common feature in all these accounts is that the new body is stronger, healthier, and lighter than the old.

Self-realization. In this kind of rebirth, the little self is overshadowed or replaced by the great Self, the personal body-ego by the transpersonal Spirit, the mortal by the Immortal. Meister Eckhart says that in this experience “the soul . . . is dead to self and alive to God.” A Sufi saint wrote, “Thy being dies away, and His person covers thy person.” Or, in the words of the Gospel of John, “No one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born from water and Spirit. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.”(2) People in such states feel their own ego concerns fade into insignificance in the face of the awesome power and light of the great Self, the God within, the “diamond essence,” the *Atman*.

The encounter with the Self can be an overwhelming and annihilating self-confrontation, as was pointed out by C. G. Jung. In his essay “Concerning Rebirth” Jung wrote:

He who is truly and hopelessly little will always drag the revelation of the greater down to the level of his littleness, and will never understand that the day of judgment for his littleness has dawned. But the man who is inwardly great will know that the long-expected friend of his soul, the immortal one, has now really come, “to lead captivity captive”; that is, to seize hold of him by whom this immortal had always been confined and held prisoner, and to make his life flow into that greater life—a moment of deadliest peril! (3)

As this statement makes clear, the deadly danger exists for those identified with the small self, the personal ego. Not all encounters with Self, however, need be traumatic or even painful. There is, after all, the vast literature of mysticism that sings in rapturous tones of ecstatic union with the divine, of dyings that are peaceful and blissful, of unitive experiences that have the character of a nuptial or are likened to dissolving in an oceanic feeling of blissful oneness.

Renewal. Some accounts of death-rebirth experiences emphasize the new quality of awareness and perception that comes into existence afterward. It is as if we have entered a new world, and a kind of pristine, shining radiance suffuses everything we perceive. The emotional response to what is perceived is also new; there is a quality of joy and freshness, an outpouring of affection and enthusiasm. In a second-century Gnostic text, *Treatise on Resurrection*, we read, “It (the

resurrection) is the revelation of what is, and the transformation of things, and a transition into newness. For imperishability descends upon the perishable; the light flows down upon the darkness, swallowing it up."(4) Here we find the metaphor of the newly born converging with the metaphor of vision unveiled, the doors of perception cleansed ("everything appears as it is—infinite"). The mystics say that after the death-rebirth revelation, because we see everything then with love and wisdom, we are seeing it from the perspective of the infinite and eternal (*sub specie aeternitatis*).

The birth of the radiant child. The biblical admonition that "except ye become as children, ye cannot enter the Kingdom of Heaven" follows naturally from the teaching that one needs to die before entering the blessed, enlightened state. Here the death-rebirth metaphor leads us to the archetype of the divine child, the *puer aeternus*. Most discussions by Jungians of the puer or puella focus on the shadow side of this archetype and on its clinical manifestations in flighty, immature "playboys" or "little girls." But the "philosophers' child" that is born as a consequence of the inner *coniunctio* of male and female, or the divine or radiant child is connected with numerous myths of the birth of a god in human form. The Indian legends of the boy Krishna (*Gopal*) and the Christian legends of the Christ child are only the best-known examples.

Jung described the child archetype as an anticipation of the synthesis of conscious and unconscious, and as a symbol of wholeness or the Self. The mythic child-god or child-hero always has an unusual, miraculous birth or a virgin conception—which symbolizes the psychic genesis of the new being. The child image represents a link to the past, to childhood, as well as to the future, as it anticipates a "nascent state of consciousness." The "golden child" or "eternal youth" is androgynous, because he/she represents the perfect union of opposites. Only the old self, the ordinary ego, identifies itself as male or female—and this self has now died. The "child" is both beginning and end, "an initial and a terminal creature," because the wholeness that it symbolizes is "older and younger than consciousness, enfolding it in time and space."(5)

The divine child is invincible. He or she overcomes dangerous enemies in infancy: one of the images of the boy Krishna shows him trampling a giant serpent underfoot in a dance—a metaphor perhaps for the overcoming of reptilian instinctual aggressiveness. An example from Greek mythology is the story of the baby Heracles, who strangled a serpent that attacked him in his crib. The radiant child has all the power of a god, since it is a god: it is the Immortal One that replaces the mortal personality that has "died."

In the Russian Orthodox liturgy, the triumph over death is expressed in the following words: "Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down

death by death, and upon those in the tomb bestowing life." I suggest that this imagery refers to the change that occurs in the psyche as the healing, transformative power of the intentional dying is experienced. The unconscious death tendencies (thanatos) that function to oppose the body's life-preserving tendencies (eros) through disease and degeneration are gradually reduced, or rather, brought into complementary balance.

One of my teachers referred to "pockets of death" within our nature that are opened up and dissolved by enlightened awareness, thus bringing about the death of death. As we consciously accept dying and "dying," the process provides spiritual nourishment. Shakespeare expresses this idea in one of the sonnets:

So shalt thou feed on death, that feeds on men,
And death once dead, there's no more dying then.(6)

In the nontheistic Chinese Taoist tradition, the archetype of the eternal child is also known and treasured. The newborn child is still connected to the Tao, to the source of its life and its arising, and this is why we should emulate it. Lao Tsu says in the *Tao Te Ching*:

He who is filled with virtue is like a newborn child.
Wasps and bees will not sting him;
Wild beasts will not fall upon him;
He will not be attacked by birds of prey.
His bones are soft, his muscles weak,
But his grip is firm. . . .
He screams all day without becoming hoarse.
This is perfect harmony.(7)

Characteristically, the Taoists emphasize the practical value, in terms of health and well-being, of attunement to the awareness of the infant.

For the individual in a process of transformation, the imagery and mythology of the eternal child fosters a positive and life-affirming attitude: we are encouraged to confront and transform our fear of death, to embrace the process of "dying" as liberating and as bringing wisdom. We thus come to know that out of the turmoil and darkness of dying comes the sparkling vitality of the newborn self. This new self is connected to the eternal source of all life, that source from which we all derive, the divine essence within. It is hence aptly named "the eternal child."

Notes:

1. C. G. Jung, "The Psychology of the Child Archetype," in *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, p. 164. Jung continues: "In the psychology of the individual, the 'child' paves the way for a future change of personality. In the

individuation process, it anticipates the figure that comes from the synthesis of conscious and unconscious elements in the personality. It is therefore a symbol which unites the opposites; a mediator, bringer of healing, that is, one who makes whole.”

2. The quote from Eckhart is in Meister Eckhart, trans. Raymond B. Blakney. The Islamic Sufi quoted is Najm ad-din al Kubra, from “The Transformation of Man in Mystical Islam,” by Fritz Meier, in *Man and Transformation*, ed. Joseph Campbell. The New Testament quote is John 3:3. A parallel passage is 1 Corinthians 15:44: “It is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. There is a natural body, and there is a spiritual body.”

3. Jung, “Concerning Rebirth,” p. 121. Edinger, in his writings and talks on the encounter with the Self, has emphasized, somewhat one-sidedly it seems to me, the overwhelming, shattering kinds of Self-confrontation, as symbolized in the story of Job. See his *Creation of Consciousness*.

4. The Nag Hammadi Library, ed. James M. Robinson, p. 53.

5. Jung, “Psychology of the Child Archetype,” pp. 151-181.

6. William Shakespeare, Sonnet 146, “Poor soul, the centre of my sinful earth.”

7. Lao Tsu, *Tao Te Ching*, trans. Gia-Fu Feng and Jane English, verse 55.

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