

Over spring break I sat down and tried to come up with an interesting yet personal subject. I started thinking of family events that were significant in my life. I thought of my Grandfather's burial and how my family believes he is a white butterfly because they saw one at his funeral. So then I asked myself "What is life after life?" and, "Are you conscious when you die?" and, "What does death feel like?" Reincarnation is something that I had been interested in for a long time but when I got to study it, I figured that it was not enough; I had decided to learn about the physical death. Eventually I will connect these subjects together to create my own concept of what happens when you die, or more specifically rebirth and decay.

As I became more involved with the idea of reincarnation, I discovered a deep personal connection to the belief. I believe that children subconsciously connect and relate to their past lives as they play "pretend" and take on animal traits. My family has a connection to the belief of reincarnation. My family and I believe that my Grandfather's consciousness reappeared in the form of a white butterfly because while he was being buried, a white butterfly fluttered overhead. Whenever I saw a white butterfly as a child, I used to burst out and say "PAPA!" One day in kindergarten I accidentally said it out loud and from then on my friends called me "Butterfly Boy." When my grandma passed away, we saw two white butterflies at her burial. I am attracted to reincarnation<sup>1</sup> because it's a very positive thought that when you die you don't just die and there is NOTHING, you are reborn into a new body and yet you are still conscious, pretty amazing right? Definition of reincarnation; Not only am I attracted to this study or belief because I have a connection to it and its interesting but because I am always looking for ways to improve myself and I think that Buddhism provides you (or you provide yourself) with the knowledge to become a better person but in the process of becoming so called enlightened you are gaining knowledge. I feel as though learning about karma and rebirth I will find out more about my spiritual connection with reincarnation.

While studying the idea of reincarnation I realized that there is a lot more behind it than just leaving your current vessel and taking a new form. There has to be something that determines where you go and who you become. It's called "Karma." Your life now was determined by your karma in your previous life and your next life is determined by the karma you gain or lose in this life. Karma is good, bad, and neutral. The different stages of rebirth are based off of karma. If you have good karma you move on and you are enlightened until you reach nirvana. If you have bad or neutral karma you're soul will either be floating around aimlessly in the intermediate state or you will be reborn but you will not be enlightened<sup>2</sup>. Two concepts that can help you with your journey of rebirth are The Four Noble Truths and The Noble Eight Fold Path. The Four Noble Truths are: all life is suffering, suffering is caused by desire, cessation of suffering is possible and If you want to stop suffering you would need to follow The Noble Eightfold Path, which is one of The Four Noble Truths, in-fact it is the most significant of The Four Noble Truths. The Noble Eightfold Path is a list of "rights", such as: The right understanding of nature; the right thought, which is free from desire and "ill-will;" restriction of the use of harsh words; right action, which is being non violent, not stealing and restriction of the use of intoxicants; right livelihood, which forbids and conduct contrary to right

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<sup>1</sup> "re·in·car·na·tion *noun* 1. The belief that the soul, upon death of the body, comes back to earth in another body or form. ("Reincarnation." *Dictionary.com*. Dictionary.com. Web. 06 May 2012. <<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/reincarnation>>.)

<sup>2</sup> (Thubten, Chodron. *Buddhism for Beginners*. Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications, 2001. Print. Page 59).

speech and right action and any trickery or fraud in the service of commerce or one's trade; right effort, which seeks to avoid generating new, unwholesome actions and encourages purifying the mind ( by avoiding and overcoming unwholesome states of mind, while developing and maintaining wholesome state); right mindfulness, or meditative practices which encourage great alertness and awareness of ones self; right concentration, or striving for mental "one-pointedness." Right effort and right mindfulness together develop right concentration and vice versa<sup>3</sup>.

Even though I had learned about this part of my life that was missing and fulfilled it, I still felt like something was missing, something about the process of death. I needed something beyond spiritual rebirth; I needed to study the physical death.

I strongly believe that when you die you should leave your body to decompose back into the earth. I believe that I should return my body to a natural economy in which it serves multiple purposes. I should not be useless just because I'm dead. My definition of a natural economy is a cycle in nature where everything has a use or purpose, for example; letting my body decompose back into the earth would be considered part of a natural economy because is it fertilizing the soil and animals are feeding off of my body to survive. Many other cultures actually do this to their dead. "Burial customs varied widely from tribe to tribe. Indians disposed of their dead in a variety of ways. Arctic tribes, for example, simply left their dead of on the frozen ground to decompose and for wild animals to eat."<sup>4</sup>

I remember seeing my dead grandmother in her opened casket and I asked myself, "Why is this necessary? I understand not wanting dead bodies to be in plain sight but I think that it is completely odd that we embalm the dead to make them last longer and prolong their decomposition and that they are buried in the small sterile boxes." This belief is a more scientific belief of "life after life" if you think about it, your nutrients are being carried out into the soil and the animals come to eat you. When this happens you are helping the plants and animals to survive.

I knew what I wanted to do with my body when it was no longer alive but I started to wonder "what actually happens to our body when we die?" Dr. Sam Parnia states, "When your heart stops beating, there is no blood getting to your brain. And so what happens is that within about 10 sec., brain activity ceases ...Yet paradoxically, 10% or 20% of people who are then brought back to life from that period, which may be a few minutes or over an hour, will report having consciousness...Are these real, or is it some sort of illusion? So the only way to tell is to have pictures only visible from the ceiling and nowhere else, because they claim they can see everything from the ceiling. So if we then get a series of 200 or 300 people who all were clinically dead, and yet they're able to come back and tell us what we were doing and were able see those pictures, that confirms consciousness really was continuing even though the brain wasn't functioning."<sup>5</sup> What I find interesting about this statement is that it is a scientific study but it ties into spirituality and rebirth. If people are "dead" and they are resuscitated and claim that

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<sup>3</sup> Magida, Arthur J., and Stuart M. Matlins. *How to Be a Perfect Stranger: A Guide to Etiquette in Other People's Religious Ceremonies*. Pages 59-60. Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Pub., 1996. Print.

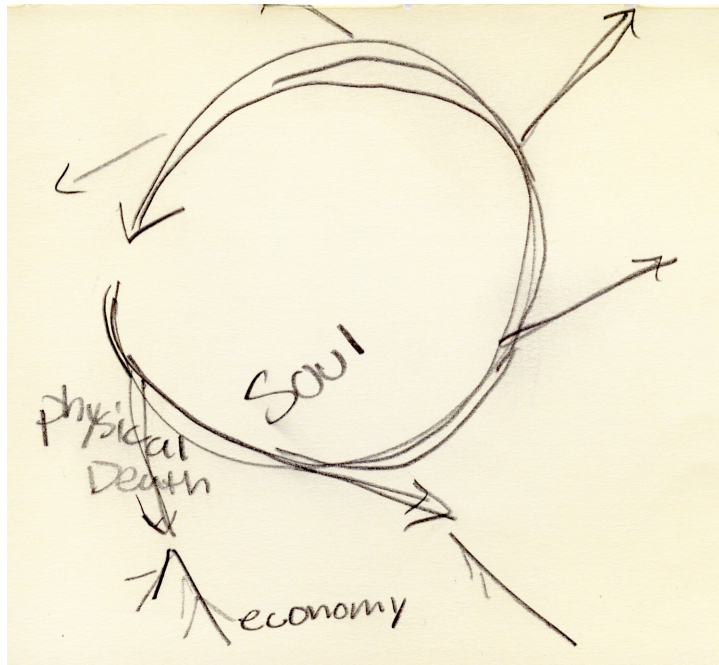
<sup>4</sup> ([www.deathreference.com/Me-Nu/Native-American-Religion](http://www.deathreference.com/Me-Nu/Native-American-Religion)).

<sup>5</sup> (Stephey, M.J. "What Happens When We Die?" *Time*. Time, 18 Sept. 2008. Web. 06 May 2012. <<http://www.time.com/time/health/article/0,8599,1842627,00.html>>.)

they are conscious and were conscious the whole time they were “dead” does that mean that they were not ready to leave their vessel?

When you are dead, your heart stops beating, you are now in *algor mortis*; there is no more blood flow, you are practically brain dead within seconds, and since you are brain dead, your organs shut down because your body can not function without a brain. Since your organs are not working you cannot expel gas. The gas is built up so much that it is forced out of your body after you become brutally bloated.

A month after death your tissue is liquid and the only thing left is a skeleton<sup>6</sup>



After studying these two beliefs I decided to come up with my own concept of “life after life,” It’s called *Cyclum Vitae*, which means Cycle of Life. *Cyclum Vitae* is a cycle in which the conscious yet ever changing soul in constantly evolving and gaining knowledge as it lives through vessels (the physical appearance). The advancement of the soul into a new vessel is determined by karma. The diagram below represents the soul shedding its vessels. The soul “sheds” vessels (physical body’s) as if it were a snake shedding its skin. Every time the soul sheds a vessel there is a new natural economy that is created, or sometimes its just a contribution.

Overall, I feel like I have gained a tremendous amount of personal fulfillment by learning about this part of my life that had always been somewhat untold. Learning about rebirth is more than just reading about it and taking notes, it is something that is experiential much like how rebirth is an experience itself.

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<sup>6</sup> (Roach, Mary. *Stiff: The Curious Lives of Human Cadavers*. New York: W.W. Norton &, 2003. Print.).

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