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SHIFTING THE GROUND WE STAND ON:

Buddhist and Western Thinkers Challenge Modernity

Essays by Linda Heuman

A Tricycle E-Book

For Amy

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INTRODUCTION

In *The Chosen*, the novelist Chaim Potok tells a story of the friendship of two gifted young men, both from devout and observant Jewish homes, both the offspring of brilliant fathers. Although the two fathers have never met, they are each familiar with the other, and each regards the other with a mixture of respect and suspicion. One is a scholar of religion, who employs the tools of his craft to shed light on Jewish historical experience. The other is a *tzaddik*, the spiritual leader of a Hasidic community and a man of deep spiritual experience and religious knowledge. The scholar seeks to bring Jewish tradition into dialogue with the modern world. He is a man of devoted belief, but his faith lacks a certain vitality. The tzaddik seeks to exclude the contemporary world from the purview of religion, for he believes that the fruits of spiritual life flourish best when that life is rooted in a foundation of stable beliefs. His faith is indeed vital, but that vitality is predicated on willfully ignoring much of humankind's rich store of knowledge about the world.

The Chosen gives dramatic shape to questions that are of signal importance in religious life today. These questions revolve around the possibilities for religious meaning in a world left significantly disenchanted by reason. They ask, What is the place of religious tradition in a world that has, in Saul Bellow's phrase, undergone "a housecleaning of belief"? How, they ask, are we to have faith in a sustaining system of meanings when the bases of such systems are continually being overturned? How, in short, are we to hold an attitude that can imbue experience with a sense of the sacred even as it speaks to, and does not reject, the particu-

lar challenges and characteristic mood of our age?

For more than a decade, the examination and illumination of these matters has been a core concern for us at *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*. The French philosopher Paul Ricoeur writes that "enigma does not block understanding but provokes it," and in our efforts we have tried to be informed by this spirit. We have tried to allow the issues that are provoked by the meeting of modernity and religious tradition to work on us, to hold us in their field of gravity as we circle around them, looking from one angle and then another and then still another. We have found that this process asks not for conceptual closure but for rich elaboration that broadens out into the social world and for knowledge that resonates deep in the recesses of the self. We have been especially fortunate that Linda Heuman has taken on these matters specifically as her journalistic beat. It is an honor to be able to introduce this collection of some of the fruits of her diligent, rigorous, eloquent, insightful, and thoroughly outstanding work.

In the collision of modern and traditional perspectives, a problem that lies at the heart of religious life in the contemporary world is brought into sharp relief. It is certainly not a problem unique to Buddhism. Indeed, it is probably felt with greatest acuity within the Abrahamic religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. No religious tradition is immune to it, and any religiously minded person confronts this problem, consciously or not, in one form or another.

In her excellent book *The Battle for God*, the religious historian Karen Armstrong describes the matter by enlisting the terms *mythos* and *logos*. These terms refer to the two great styles of human consciousness, the first concerned with meaning, the second with practical action, factual knowledge, and reason. According to Armstrong, prior to modernity, mythos and logos were held to be complementary aspects of hu-

man experience. Different cultures, traditions, and individuals certainly found widely different ways to mediate the contrasts and contradictions between the two perspectives, but in some fashion both were given play in the shaping of personal and social experience. Yet the modern period, marked by the predominance of rational thought, has discredited symbolic experience—myth, narrative, and so forth—as a reliable means of knowing the world. As a result, she writes, our symbolic sensibilities have atrophied. That has been the price we have paid for the astonishing successes of systematic reason, especially in its most powerful form—namely science, widely thought to be our most trustworthy mirror of reality. Jean-Paul Sartre described the existential impact of this state of affairs as the "God-shaped hole" in modern consciousness. The scholar of comparative religion Huston Smith spoke of how those of us in the contemporary era have "erased transcendence from our map of reality."

But humans, being the meaning-making creatures that we are, are inescapably religious. The great historian of religion Mircea Eliade described the drive toward the "discovery of the sacred" as an innate feature of human nature. The forms and symbols that express sacredness vary widely, but the inner movement toward it is a constant—even now, in what is often spoken of as a secular age. In the modern period, however, the tension between factual descriptions of the world built on rational knowing and meaning-rich descriptions based on imaginative knowing has become acute. Science and religion, as exemplary cases of each style of knowing, are, even after centuries, far from having worked out their troubled relationship, and the question remains whether and how they can. For some in both camps, the answer is that no rapprochement is possible, as the two ways of seeing the world are believed to be simply incompatible and incommensurate. Others suggest a kind of division of labor, in which each addresses a separate set of concerns. Some believe we can, and must,

find our way to a broad synthesis, something new and whole, built on yet fundamentally different from what has come before. This last, for all its appeal, is still more wish than reality.

In his essay "The R Word," the sociologist Robert Bellah, a friend and mentor to *Tricycle*, writes:

> Religion isn't about theory; it's about meaning. Religious texts and statements are not, in their basic function, about imparting information with which one must agree or disagree. What they impart is meaning, and meaning doesn't tell us something new; it seems just to be saying the same old thing, though in a deeper understanding it makes sense of the new. Meaning is iterative, not cumulative. If someone in an intimate relation says to the other, "Do you love me?" and the other replies, "Why do you ask? I told you that yesterday," we can say that he doesn't get it. The request was not for information or some new bit of knowledge but for the reiteration of meaning. Similarly, if someone said, "Why do we have to say the Lord's Prayer *this* Sunday?—we already said it *last* Sunday," again, we would say that the person is missing the point, that he or she is making what philosophers call a category mistake. For Christians, the Lord's Prayer is not news that we can forget once we've heard it; it is an expression of who we are in relation to who God is, and its reiteration is not redundant but a renewed affirmation of meaning, an invocation of a total context.

It is against the backdrop described by Bellah that we can get a better handle on the intensity of feeling shared by religious fundamentalists and ardent advocates of scientism. Both share a fundamental misunderstanding of what religion *is*. They take symbolic language and

experience and attempt to make it literal.

It is common for us moderns to regard traditional religions as artifacts of a more superstitious past. But this self-congratulatory attitude masks a complex and rich matter. In *Before Philosophy: The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man*, the historian of religion Henri Frankfort writes that traditional people have always been able to distinguish between logical reasoning and what he calls mythopoeic thought, but in religious matters, matters having to do with our relationship to the sacred, myth, rather than logic, was the preferred mode of thought. The question of whether the symbolic forms of religious life are psychological projections or objective realities is a necessary question for the rational mind. For the mythic mind, however, such questions, based as they are on a detached distance from experience, on a series of sharp dichotomies—subject and object, inside and outside, reality and appearance—such questions are foreign, because the either/or distinctions on which they rest don't apply. Or rather, they apply solely on a practical level. Mythic thought reflects an experience of continuity among all aspects of a single reality. "Whatever is capable of affecting mind, feeling, or will," writes Frankfort, "has thereby established its undaunted reality."

Throughout human history, religion has been the primary repository of a wisdom that guides the innate impulse toward an experience of the sacred, toward self-transcendence. In countless and often contradictory ways, religion affirms the recognition that the egoic self is but a small part of who one is and that to live entirely within its familiar confines is to experience only a small part of the life one is given. It has provided not only the ritual forms for eliciting transcendence but also the conceptual and social contexts in which such experiences are given rich elaboration and tied to a virtuous and purposeful life.

Today, more than at any other time, we have greater and more ready

access to humankind's rich and diverse legacy of wisdom about what Aristotle called the "virtuous activity of the soul."

But such wisdom cannot truly be said to be cumulative; neither is it easily passed from one cultural setting to another. Its expression must be worked out in accordance with the particulars of the cultural and historical milieu in which, inevitably, it is embedded. If wisdom about the means and meaning of sacred experience is to remain vital and approachable, if it is to address, as it must, our deepest sensibilities, the body of insights developed in one cultural context must, as conditions change, be adapted to the exigencies of another.

Our traditions need, from time to time, to be revitalized. During periods when changes in our world and worldview are especially profound, that need becomes more acute. It is in our nature to pursue and, just as important, confer meaning upon the transcendent imperative. But we in the modern period have yet to articulate comprehensively a religious approach that is equal to and definitive of the unique challenges of our times.

No formula exists for the getting of wisdom, and neither does one exist for its reformulation. Today, science has replaced the traditional cosmologies with an indifferent universe, and social systems and institutions have been shown to be the creation of human beings and not expressions of divine will or natural order. We postmoderns cannot rely uncritically on the certainties of the past, for most of them have lost much of their power. But, if we wish to live full and good lives, neither can we ignore the wisdom that the past affords. These are the two horns of the dilemma upon which modern religious consciousness is perched.

Throughout history, human beings have understood sacredness and transcendence in a manner that reflected their own deepest and most characteristic experience of themselves and their world. For us, living as we do at a time when the truth of plurality outweighs the truth-claims of

any specific point of view, religion, if it is to avoid the pull of regressively contrived certainty, must be in key ways different in character from how it was for those of earlier periods. For us, religion must be consonant with science—"our most trustworthy mirror of reality"—but not defined by it. For us, the key issues in religious life no longer revolve around the particular faith one holds but how one holds one's faith.

We have yet to articulate a historically meaningful answer to the religious challenges posed by our times, but it is in our nature to respond, as best we can and in ways we may not even understand, to the problem we are given. In her essay "A New Way Forward," Linda Heuman describes how the tradition of human science—which entails the rigorous study of qualitative experience and the web of meanings that we humans both create and abide in—can shed light on the impasses we now face. Initiated in the 19th century by Wilhelm Dilthey and carried forward by such luminaries as sociologist Max Weber, cultural anthropologist Ruth Benedict, the philosophers of phenomenology and modern hermeneutics, literary critic Walter Benjamin, and countless others, the approaches of the human sciences can illuminate the very particular dilemmas we face in coming to terms with a world shaped by science, history, and pluralism. As Heuman writes:

> Whereas any religion, like Buddhism, is about affirming *particular* meanings, human science is about understanding the background that makes any particular affirmation possible. So human science can shine a light on the particular ways in which any tradition, religious or secular, affirms meaning; it places them all in a radically new context not accounted for by their own self-understandings. It opens the way for individuals and communities to engage traditions in a dialogue that is both affirming and

critical; and it opens those traditions to dialogue with other forms of knowledge.

By looking into the details of lived experience, an outline of how best we can meet the challenges posed by modernity will, I believe, become apparent. We can't help but live out—each in our own way—a portion of the answer, even as that answer eludes our grasp.

—Andrew Cooper, Features Editor

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WHOSE BUDDHISM IS TRUEST?

No one's—and everyone's, it turns out.
Long-lost scrolls shed some surprising light.

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Two thousand years ago, Buddhist monks rolled up sutras written on birch bark, stuffed them into earthen pots, and buried them in a desert. We don't know why. They might have been disposing of sacred trash. Maybe they were consecrating a stupa. If they meant to leave a gift for future members of the Buddhist community—a wisdom time capsule, so to speak—they succeeded; and they could never have imagined how great that gift would turn out to be.

Fragments of those manuscripts, recently surfaced, are today stoking a revolution in scholars' understanding of early Buddhist history, shattering false premises that have shaped Buddhism's development for millennia and undermining the historical bases for Buddhist sectarianism. As the implications of these findings ripple out from academia into the Buddhist community, they may well blow away outdated, parochial barriers between traditions and help bring Buddhism into line with the pluralistic climate of our times.

Sometime probably around 1994, looters unearthed 29 birch bark scrolls somewhere in eastern Afghanistan or northwest Pakistan, an

area once known as Gandhara—a Buddhist cultural hotspot during the early Christian era. The scrolls appeared on the antiquities market in Peshawar, having weathered the same turbulent political climate that would lead to the Taliban's demolition of the Bamiyan Buddhas. The British Library acquired them in 1994.

The scrolls arrived rolled up, flattened, folded, and disintegrating. Curators carefully unpacked and examined them. They found the script indecipherable, the language unusual. Suspecting that they might in fact be written in the forgotten language of Gandhari, they immediately sent a photograph to Richard Salomon, a professor of Sanskrit and Buddhist studies at the University of Washington, one of a handful of early Buddhist language experts worldwide who could read Gandhari.

The news soon came that the birch bark scrolls were the oldest Buddhist manuscripts known. (Now called the British Library Collection, these scrolls are in the process of being translated by the Early Buddhist Manuscript Project, a team of scholars under Salomon's direction.) The initial find was followed by several others throughout the following decade. Today there are at least five collections worldwide, comprising roughly a hundred texts and several hundred text fragments dating from the first century B.C.E. to the third century C.E. The Gandharan collections are not only the oldest extant Buddhist manuscripts but also the oldest surviving manuscripts of South Asia, period. They reach back into an era when the oral tradition of Buddhism probably first began to be written down.

Preliminary inventories and initial translations reveal that many texts are Gandhari versions of previously known Buddhist material, but most are new—including never-before-seen Abhidharma (Buddhist philosophy) treatises and commentaries, and stories set in contemporary Gandhara. The collections contain the earliest known Prajnaparamita

(Perfection of Wisdom) texts and the earliest textual references to the Mahayana school, both from the first century C.E. Taken together, these scrolls and scroll fragments are a stunning find: an entirely new strand of Buddhist literature.

According to experts in Gandhari, the new material is unlikely to reveal earth-shattering facts about the Buddha. And don't expect big surprises in terms of new doctrine either—no fifth noble truth is likely to be found. But the discovery of a new member in the Buddhist canonical family has profound implications for practitioners. It settles the principal justification for long-standing sibling rivalries among Buddhist traditions, and it does so not by revealing a winner but by upending the cornerstone—a false paradigm of history—on which such rivalries are based.

Buddhist tradition maintains that after his awakening, the Buddha taught for some 45 years throughout eastern India. Among his disciples were a few, including his attendant Ananda, who had highly trained memories and could repeat his words verbatim. It is said that after the Buddha's death, his disciples gathered at what we now call the First Council, and these memorizers recited what they had heard. Then all the monks repeated it, and the single and definitive record of the "words of the Buddha" [*buddhavacana*] was established. Thus was the Buddhist canon born.

Or was it?

Every school of Buddhism stakes its authority, and indeed its very identity, on its historical connection to this original first canon. Buddhists of all traditions have imagined that our texts tumble from the First Council into our own hands whole and complete—pristine—unshaped by human agency in their journey through time. This sense of the past is deeply ingrained and compelling. If our texts don't faithfully

preserve the actual words of the Buddha in this way, we might think, how could they be reliable? Isn't that what we base our faith on?

But as we're about to see, history works otherwise. And having a view more in line with the facts here frees us from chauvinist views and gives us grounds for respecting differences between and within diverse Buddhist schools. As for undermining our basis for faith, not to worry. To get in line with the facts, we're not going to abandon Manjushri's sword of wisdom. We're going to use it.

I first heard about the Gandharan manuscripts while living in Germany in 2009, when I attended a lecture on early Buddhism by Professor Salomon, who was visiting from Seattle. The complex details of the talk he delivered left me mystified—at that point the technicalities of early Indian philology stood as a dense forest I hadn't yet entered. But I was curious about those scrolls. I wanted to understand what this new literary tradition meant for Buddhist practitioners like me.

While searching online, I found a 2006 talk by Salomon in which he first unveiled for a general audience the importance of translators' findings. Toward the end of that talk, my attention became riveted. As Salomon was explaining, scholars had traditionally expected that if they traced the various branches of the tree of Buddhist textual history back far enough, they would arrive at the single ancestral root. To illustrate this model, he pointed to a chart projected on the screen behind him. The chart showed the Gandhari canon as the potential missing link along an evolutionary ladder—the hypothetical antecedent of all other Buddhist canons. "This is how someone who began to study this [Gandharan] material might have thought the pattern worked."

As scholars scrutinized the Gandhari texts, however, they saw that history didn't work that way at all, Salomon said. It was a mistake to assume that the foundation of Buddhist textual tradition was singular,

that if you followed the genealogical branches back far enough into the past they would eventually converge. Traced back in time, the genealogical branches diverged and intertwined in such complex relationships that the model of a tree broke down completely. The picture looked more like a tangled bush, he reported.

Here is where I clicked Rewind: these newly found manuscripts, he declared, administer the coup de grâce to a traditional conception of Buddhism's past that has been disintegrating for decades. It is now clear that *none* of the existing Buddhist collections of early Indian scriptures—not the Pali, Sanskrit, Chinese, nor even the Gandhari—"can be privileged as the most authentic or original words of the Buddha."

It is odd how matters enacted on the wide stage of history can sometimes present themselves immediately in the close corners of personal life. I am a Mahayana practitioner; my partner practices in the Theravada tradition. The challenge of accommodating differences in the Buddhist family is an occasional cloud that hovers over our dinner table. What Salomon was saying seemed to indicate a new way of viewing and working with sectarian clashes at whatever level they might occur.

Puzzling out whether (and how) the discovery of a new Buddhist literary tradition could undermine sectarian sparring would lead me deep into the foreign terrain of academic Buddhism. In the months to come, I would follow a trail from one expert to another across college campuses from Seattle to Palo Alto. I pored over stacks of papers looking for insights. In the end, when it all came clear, I understood why the process had been so difficult. I had to assimilate new facts. I had to let go of some cherished beliefs. But what really made it hard was that also I had to identify and change a fundamental background picture I had about the nature of Buddhist history within which I construed those beliefs and assimilated those facts. I had to cut down the genealogical tree. And that

was not easy, because I was sitting in it.

Actually, it isn't just historians of Buddhism who are finding flaws in convergence-to-a-single-root pictures of the past. The evolutionary tree model of origins is also under the axe in biology and other scholastic fields. For some time there has been a broad trend of thinking away from tree models of history, Salomon later told me. In the academic study of early Buddhist history, Salomon says, this model had been gradually being discredited. But, he says, these scrolls were "the clincher."

Because early Buddhism was an oral tradition, tracking any Buddhist text back in time is like following a trail of bread crumbs that ends abruptly. So for us looking to the past, a critical moment in history occurred when Buddhists started writing down their texts rather than transmitting them orally. That is when the Buddha's words moved into a more enduring form.

Pali tradition reports that Buddhist monks in the Theravada tradition started writing down texts in about the first century B.C.E. The manuscript record in Pali, however, doesn't begin until about 800 C.E. But the Gandhari manuscripts date from as early as the first century B.C.E. If monks were writing in one part of India, they could likely have been writing in other parts of India as well—so this would seem to add credence to the Pali claims.

If we were looking for a single ancestral root of all Buddhist canons, the moment the teachings got written down would be the first possible point in time we could find their physical record. So when these Gandhari scrolls appeared, dating to the earliest written era of Buddhism, scholars hoped they might turn out to be that missing link. They zeroed in on the Gandhari literature that had known versions in Pali, Sanskrit, and Chinese to see how texts preserved in Gandhari related to other early Buddhist texts. Comparing individual texts across canons, they

noticed something startling and surprising, "although in retrospect," Salomon admitted in his lecture, "it should have been expected, and it makes perfect sense."

Salomon described what happened when he compared the Gandhari version of one well-known Buddhist poem, the *Rhinoceros Sutra*, to its Pali and Sanskrit versions. He found that the sequence of verses and their arrangement were similar to the Pali. The specific wording of the poem, however, was much closer to the Sanskrit. Salomon couldn't say whether the Gandhari was more closely related to one or the other version (as it would have to be if one were the parent). It was closely related to both, but in different ways. In other words, the texts were parallel—and different.

This kind of complex linking showed up again and again when scholars compared Gandhari texts with their versions in Pali, Sanskrit, and Chinese. Texts had close parallels to one, two, and sometimes all three of the other language versions. Looking then at the group as a whole, they ascertained that this new corpus of Gandhari material was a parallel to, and not an antecedent of, the other canons—not the missing parent, but a long-lost sibling.

We now know that if there ever was a point of convergence in the Buddhist family tree—the missing link, the single original and authentic Buddhist canon—it is physically lost in the era of oral transmission. We have not yet found, and probably will not ever find, evidence for it.

But even more significant is what we have found: that is, difference. These scrolls are incontrovertible proof that as early as the first century B.C.E., there was another significant living Buddhist tradition in a separate region of India and in an entirely different language from the tradition preserved in Pali.

"And where there are two, we are now on very solid ground in sug-

gesting there were many more than two," says Collett Cox, a professor of Sanskrit and Buddhist studies at the University of Washington and the co-director of the Early Buddhist Manuscript Project. A single partial Gandhari Buddhist manuscript predated these modern finds—a version of the *Dharmapada* discovered in 1892. The fact of one extant manuscript in the Gandhari language suggested, but couldn't prove, that Gandhara had once had a rich literary tradition. In the same way, there are other indicators—such as monuments and inscriptions—in other parts of India suggesting other potentially literate early Buddhist cultures. "We don't have any texts from them," Cox says. "But we now are on very solid ground in saying they probably had texts too. Where there are two [traditions], there are probably five. And where there are five, there may have been fifteen or twenty-five."

Cox suggests that "rather than asking the question, what single language did the Buddha use and what represents the earliest version of his teachings, we might have to accept that from the very beginning there were various accounts of his teachings, different sutras, and different versions of sutras transmitted in different areas. At the very beginning we might have a number of different sources, all of whom represent or claim to represent the teaching of the Buddha." Cox emphasizes that the Gandharan Buddhism is clearly not a "rebel offshoot" of the Pali canon but its own entirely localized strand—unique, but not unrelated. Early Buddhists in different regions shared many texts in common. Clearly, Buddhist monks of different language traditions in early India were in contact, and they traded ideas and influenced each other in complex ways.

If a multiplicity of traditions is what we have now, and as far as the record goes back in time multiplicity is what we've always had, maybe we're not finding a single root of Buddhism because there wasn't one in

the first place. Sometimes not-finding is, after all, the supreme finding.

"Nobody holds the view of an original canon anymore," Oskar von Hinüber, one of the world's leading scholars of Pali, told me.

Consider why scholars might think this. First of all, there are certain practical difficulties of oral transmission in a time before digital recording. How could 500 monks have agreed on 45 years of the Buddha's words?

Von Hinüber also points out that the sutras themselves record a deep and persistent quarrel between the Buddha's attendant, Ananda, and Mahakasyapa, who presided over the Council and was the principal disciple at the time of the Buddha's death. He suggests that it would be Pollyannaish to imagine that the Council (if it even occurred) was politic-free and harmonious.

"There are many indications that [the stories of the First Council] are not correct in the way of a historical report. But they tell us something that is interesting and important," says von Hinüber. "Buddhists themselves were aware of the fact that at some point in history their texts must have been shaped by somebody into the standard form they now have, beginning *Thus have I heard*. Who this was, we don't know."

Interestingly, built into the traditional account of the First Council is the story of one monk who arrived late. He asked the others what he had missed. When they told him how they had formalized the Buddha's teachings, he objected. He insisted that he himself had heard the Buddha's discourses and would continue to remember them as he had heard them.

"This is a very important story," says von Hinüber, "because it shows that Buddhists themselves were aware of the fact of diverging traditions."

Religious orthodoxy wants to claim that one's own tradition is the best. To do that, one needs to point to something unique to make it so.

Having the sole true version of a singular truth is just such a foothold. And not only for Buddhists. Elaine Pagels, the scholar of religion who brought to light the Gnostic gospels, told *Tricycle* in 2005:

> The Church father Tertullian said, *Christ taught one single thing, and that's what we teach, and that is what is in the creed.* But he's writing this in the year 180 in North Africa, and what he says Christ taught would never fit in the mouth of a rabbi, such as Jesus, in first-century Judea. For a historically-based tradition—like Christianity, and as you say, Buddhism—there's a huge stake in the claim that what it teaches goes back to a specific revelation, person, or event, and there is a strong tendency to deny the reality of constant innovation, choice, and change.

The Buddhist canons as they exist today are the products of historical contingencies. They resound with the many voices that have shaped them through time. But orthodoxy requires the opposite, a wall you can't put your fist through: singular, unchanging, findable truth. Buddhism's textual root wasn't singular, and it wasn't unchanging. As it turns out, it wasn't so findable, either.

"That's the further step that we're taking, to dispense with the idea of the original because that is a kind of pipe dream or figment of the imagination," says Paul Harrison, a professor of religious studies at Stanford University and a member of the editorial board for the Schøyen Collection (another recently discovered collection of ancient Buddhist manuscripts). Harrison is also a translator. As such, he gives us a hands-on report of how texts weather the practicalities of translation. To the extent that we are still holding onto that tree model, Harrison is about to pull the last leaves from our hands. Translators used to be guided by the

notion, he explains, that if you put enough different versions of a sutra together, kept the overlap, and eliminated all the variance, eventually you could reconstruct the prototype. "According to that model," he says, "it'll all narrow to a point. But basically what we are finding is that it doesn't narrow to a point. The more we know, the more varied and indeterminate it is right at the beginning." Trying to reconstruct the original version of any early sutra—the one that is unmediated, accurate, and complete—is now generally considered, in principle, futile. Indeed, Harrison asks, "What are you aiming at?" Looking for such an original is ingrained, essentialist thinking, he says.

He points out, "We often say, 'Tibetan translation, Chinese translation, *Sanskrit original*. As soon as you say *Sanskrit original*, you drop back into that sloppy but entirely natural way of thinking, that this is the original so we can throw away the copies. But in fact, that Sanskrit original of whatever sutra is just again another version. So the idea that one of them is the original and all the others are more or less imperfect shadows of it has to be given up. But it is very hard to give it up. It's almost impossible to give it up." And the irony is not lost on Harrison, who adds, "This is what the teaching of the Buddha is all about."

One problem with the traditional model of textual transmission, according to Harrison, is that it doesn't take into account cross-influences—the very real cases of text conflation when scribes or translators might have (for example, when standardizing) copied features from multiple differing versions, thus producing a new version. He continues: "If everything just proceeds in its own vertical line, and there is no crossways influence, that is fine; you know where you are. But once things start flowing horizontally, you get a real mess. Having something old, of course, is valuable because you are more likely to be closer to an earlier form. But notice I'm careful to say now 'an earlier form' and not

'*the* earliest form.' A first-century B.C.E. [Gandhari] manuscript is going to give you a better guide to an earlier form than an 18th-century Sri Lankan copy will. But that's not an absolute guarantee, just a slightly better one."

Harrison says that not only is it *physically* unlikely that we could find an original Buddhist canon (because the teachings predated writing), but also it is *theoretically impossible*, according to the Buddha's own teachings on the nature of reality. "It is pure *anatmavada* [the doctrine of nonself, non-essentialism]. We expect it [the original *buddhavacana*] to be the same—invariable and unchanging, kind of crisp and sharp at the sides all around." That is, after all, the kind of canon that Buddhists who make historical claims to authenticity—and all Buddhist schools have traditionally made such claims and based their authority on them—believe their tradition possesses or other traditions lack: not a "one-of-many-versions" canon but "the real one."

"It's just not going to be like that," Harrison says.

What would it mean to have "all the Buddha's teachings?" Would it be every word he said? What about meaningful silences? Well, would it be what he meant then? When he said what to whom? About what? We can't pin down the complete content of the Buddha's teachings, nor can we isolate the teachings from their context. We can't draw a hard line around them.

Neither can we draw a solid line around different schools. Harrison reports that looking backward in time, already by the first century C.E. boundaries between the Mahayana and non-Mahayana begin to blur. The Gandhari manuscripts probably reflect content of early monastic libraries, and the texts seem to have been intentionally buried. Mahayana and mainstream Buddhist sutras were recovered together and presumably buried together. Harrison believes that the monks who engaged in

Mahayana practices were most likely Vinaya-observing; they likely lived in monasteries alongside practitioners of more mainstream Buddhism.

These first-century Mahayana texts in the new collections are already highly developed in terms of narrative complexity and Mahayana doctrine. They couldn't be the first Mahayana sutras, Harrison says. "The earlier stages of the Mahayana go *far* back. The Mahayana has longer roots and older roots than we thought before." (Not roots all the way back to the Buddha, though—Harrison agrees with the general scholarly consensus that the Mahayana developed after the Buddha's death.) Nonetheless, he says, "Probably lying behind these Mahayana texts there are others with much stronger mainstream coloration, where it is not so easy to tell whether it's Mahayana or Shravakayana." [Shravakayana means literally "the way of the hearers," i.e., those who follow the path with arahantship as its goal.]

During this period of early Buddhism there were many different strands of practice and trends of thought that were not yet linked. "We could have the Perfection of Wisdom strand and a Pure Land strand and a worship of the Buddha strand, and all sorts of things going on," Harrison remarks. Only later did these threads coalesce into what we now consider "the Mahayana."

Harrison suggested we consider a braided river as a better metaphor than a tree for the historical development of Buddhist traditions. A braided river has a number of strands that fan out and reunite. "Its origin is not one spring, but a marsh or a network of small feeder streams," he told me. According to this model, the Mahayana and Vajrayana "are merely downstream in the onward flow of creativity. They are activities similar in nature to early Buddhism—not radically different. And a lot of current in their channels has come all the way from the headwaters," he says. "Whether it all has the single taste of liberation is

another question."

In such a picture of textual transmission—fluid, dynamic, and intermingled—where and how could one stake a territorial claim? Sectarian posturing is based on having *the* actual words of the Buddha—complete, stable, unmediated, and self-contained. Once all one can have is a *complex of versions* of the Buddha's words—partial, changing, shaped, and commingled with other versions—in what sense would it be *authoritative* if one's own version was bottled upstream or down?

But I still wanted to drink my water bottled upstream even though I knew that kind of thinking no longer made sense. I couldn't put my finger on what was bothering me. Finally, I looked inside my glass. What did I assume was in it? What do we imagine we have when we have the Buddha's words?

We think that if we have the Buddha's actual words we have his true intent. The whole edifice of sectarian claims based on history remained teetering on this.

Somehow we picture the Buddha's true, single, unambiguous meaning encapsulated in his words like jewels inside a box, passed from one generation to the next like Grandmother's heirlooms. But that's not the way meanings or words work. Consider the following from the well-known scholar of religion Robert Bellah:

> Zen Buddhism began in Japan at a time when strong social structures hemmed in individuals on every side. The family you were born to determined most of your life-chances. Buddhism was a way to step outside these constricting structures. Becoming a monk was called *shukke*, literally "leaving the family." We live in an almost completely opposite kind of society, where all institutions are weak and the family is in shambles. You don't need Bud-

dhism to "leave the family." To emphasize primarily the individualistic side of Buddhism (especially Zen) in America is only to contribute to our pathology, not ameliorate it.

In India, "leaving the family" means "getting married." To my Jewish grandmother, it meant "changing religions." In the household where I was raised, it meant "going to college." The very same words, spoken in a different context, have different meanings. The meaning of words is their *use in context*. A set of words stripped of their context is like playing pieces stripped of their board game. What would we have? Certainly it would be good to know what the Buddha said. To the extent that we share the conventions of 5th-century B.C.E. Indians, we might understand some of what he meant. If we increased the conventions we shared with them (say, by learning early Indian languages or by studying history), obviously we would understand more. But context is vast—an unbounded, interdependent web of connections. And it is dynamic, shifting moment to moment. Context is finished the moment it happens; then it is a new context. We really can't recreate it. And even if we could, we still wouldn't know exactly how the Buddha was using his words within that context, so we wouldn't know exactly what he *meant*.

Just as our search for an original set of Buddha's definitive words failed, and all we were left with were provisional versions, in the same way a search for the Buddha's definitive meaning fails too. What we have are traditions of interpretation. But that's not the kind of authority we imagine when we claim sectarian primacy. Sectarian authority claims assume solid essentialist ground. That type of ground is just not there.

When it comes right down to it, sectarian posturing contradicts the Buddha's message as all traditions understand it. Those false pictures of history and language within which sectarianism finds a foothold are in

turn rooted in another false picture—a picture even more pervasive and pernicious. That picture is an essentialist view of the nature of reality, which according to the Buddha's doctrine of selflessness is the source of not just this but all our suffering—the wrong view that is *the very point of Buddhism* to refute.

The siblings in my family don't have a single, same, enduring, essential feature in common that connects us to each other (or to our ancestors), nor do we need one. Anyone could pick us out of a crowd as related. I have my father's nose and my aunt's height; my sister has my grandmother's hair and my father's fast walk; my brother looks like my father and me. The traditions of the Buddhist family can dress, think, and practice differently and still be recognizable family members in exactly the same way in which the members of our own family are recognizably related to us.

All the siblings in my family are authentic members of my family. Because our identity doesn't depend on our possessing some unchanging "common thing," we don't have to argue over who has more of it. If we understand identity in this way, all Buddhists are 100 percent Buddhist.

Letting go of our old assumptions about history and language shouldn't make us uneasy. The views we're challenging as we assimilate these new archaeological discoveries were never Buddhist to begin with. We're not abandoning the basis for our faith; we're confirming it. And in so doing, we open up the possibility to truly appreciate different Buddhist traditions as equal members of our Buddhist family.

2

RELIGION IN EVOLUTION

MAY 2012

In an interview with *Tricycle* almost a decade ago, the sociologist of religion Robert N. Bellah addressed a central problem—perhaps *the* central problem—facing religious people today. Our modern intellectual inheritance demands a critical approach to received wisdom, yet faith would seem to require the opposite: trust in the reliability and authoritativeness of tradition. How can we approach the study of religion in a way that is both affirmative and critical? *Tricycle* asked.

Bellah, who is widely regarded as the preeminent figure in his field, agreed that putting our hands over our ears isn't an option for modern religious people; we must critique tradition thoroughly. But there is a third possibility, Bellah suggested. Taking a page from the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur, Bellah suggested that we can move from an unquestioning acceptance of tradition through a critical investigation and come out the other side to another stage of belief, a "second naiveté." Second naiveté, he said, "accepts the critical process, yet 'in and through criticism' it lets the symbols and narratives embedded in tradition speak again; it listens to what they are saying."

But how do you do *that*?

There is a scene in the film *Howl*—about the obscenity trial of Allen Ginsberg's poem—in which the prosecutor turns to literary critic Mark Schorer and asks him to translate what Ginsberg meant when he wrote

"angel-headed hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly connection to the starry dynamo in the machinery of night." Schorer replies, "Sir, you can't translate poetry into prose. That's why it's poetry."

Just like poetry, symbols and narratives speak their own language. And in an era of rationalism, these types of truth-accounts, especially in the realm of religion, are no longer our native tongue. Symbols and narratives may still be speaking, but for the most part we are meaning-monolinguists.

Maybe you think the prosecutor was simply square. Then consider this. When you learn that the traditional accounts of the Buddha's life don't line up well with the historical facts—or for that matter, when you learn that the scriptures' claims to historical accuracy are false or, at best, rest on shaky ground—do you feel you have lost something? When you take those accounts out of your category marked "facts" and put them into one marked "stories," did you move them up or down—promote or demote them? Now, what happens if you think of them as "myths"? How do you value them now?

This is just a surface symptom of a profound and very hard-to-see problem with enormous implications for our own self-understanding and for our potential to understand others. For several centuries, there has been a takeover afoot in the realm of human meaning. In modern Western culture—and increasingly globally—a certain type of rational, theoretical knowledge has come to dominate territory that throughout earlier human history was shared with other modes of knowing, other forms of truth. Cultural forms like poetry, music, theater, and art—which are primarily expressions of meaning—have become second-class citizens, pushed to the margins and required—like Ginsberg's poem—to speak in the dominant language of fact. Guided by the assumptions of the modern mindset, ritual, symbol, and myth can seem not only

inscrutable but superfluous, even worthy of contempt. With this as our condition, it is hard to imagine how a religious person could slam into scientific knowledge and historical fact and come out not just unscathed, but richer for the experience. Ricoeur's second naiveté sounds—frankly—well, naive.

Robert Bellah is on to that problem.

At the time of the *Tricycle* interview, he was already years into writing a book that would take up Ricoeur's challenge. Reflecting on his motivation for writing it, he said, "My scholarly interest in religion stems from my belief that [it] is the primary way we humans have tried to understand the cosmos and ourselves. Seeing how that understanding has changed over time helps us comprehend where we are now." He called his book in progress a "*Bildungsroman* of the human race." This "coming-of-age story" of humanity's search for meaning, *Religion in Human Evolution*, was released in 2011. Insightful and magisterial, it is the crowning achievement of a brilliant scholar who is sympathetic to religion and deeply attuned to the problems of modernity.

It is not at all self-evident that a book with the title *Religion in Human Evolution* would be an inviting read for the religiously sensitive. Nor is it, necessarily. Bellah has written a scholarly, critical book. He draws on scientific explanations and historical facts to present and support a new multistranded theory of religion, one that places the human pursuit of meaning squarely in the context of our social history, which in turn rests in the context of our biological and cosmological evolution.

The book tops out at more than 750 pages, and at times it can be slow going. Many of Bellah's propositions are controversial. For example, evolutionary theory comes loaded with progress-myth baggage, whether what is evolving are species (simple to complex), cultures (primitive to advanced), or humans (immature to mature). The author is aware of

these connotations, of course, and he makes some pretty fine distinctions to distance himself from them. The best thing, I think, is to bracket one's objections until the end, and let Bellah present his case. It will be worth it.

Bellah sets out ambitiously to answer the question of where religion came from. He focuses on the evolution of capacities in general and more particularly on our multifarious capacities to understand the world and find meaning in it. But because religion is embedded in other dimensions of human experience, the scope of his task quickly escalates from ambitious to dizzying. Bellah at first faces a kind of unnesting, akin to a Russian *matryoshka* doll: to understand religion, we have to open the question of society; but to understand society, we first have to open the question of biology; but to open biology, we first have to open the question of cosmology. Each single level in turn can be multidimensional: for example, society includes economics, politics, and demographics. Then consider that each dimension changes over time, sending ripples through the others. Bellah tracks these whirling clouds of change against a timeline starting at the Big Bang; he stops just short of the last two millennia—one would imagine, breathless.

Bellah focuses in on breakthrough moments in cultural history—stageshifts—when new capacities emerged, as when we grew from a primitive stage without language in which we communicated primarily by bodily gestures or basic sounds into a more complex one with language and the capacity to speak, tell stories, and understand our world with a new kind of coherence. (Working from the scheme laid out by the evolutionary psychologist Merlin Donald, Bellah calls these stages "mimetic" and "mythic.") Bellah's key interest is the most recent shift, which, he argues, happened nearly simultaneously in various cultures worldwide about two and a half millennia ago. At that time, what Donald

calls "theoretic" culture emerged out of mythic culture. Humans gained the ability to step back and reflect on their myths and their experience in a new way; they began to reflect on thought itself, to critique their social order, and to imagine alternatives—like spiritual transcendence or social utopias. Bellah uses Karl Jasper's term for this era, the *axial age*, and he paints the axial worlds of Israel, India, Greece, and China in elaborate detail. For each, he illustrates how the convergence of conditions on multiple levels led to an axial breakthrough, unique to that culture and time but eerily akin to axial breakthroughs happening elsewhere.

In Bellah's view, the nature of evolution as it applies to capacities for human meaning is never "out with the old, in with the new" triumphalism. New modes of understanding always arise in dependence on existing conditions. Theoretic culture arose in dependence on mythic culture, which in turn arose in dependence on mimetic culture. And new capacities don't supersede the old ones. "Nothing is ever lost" is a Bellah signature refrain. Rather, he insists, when a new capacity arises, it takes its place alongside existing capacities; they work out a new way to interrelate and, to the degree that this succeeds, a new integration. Theoretic culture didn't get rid of mythic or mimetic cultures; rather, it caused them to be reorganized and repurposed.

Worldviews shift in a similar manner. When Buddhism arose out of India's Vedic religion, the Buddha didn't oust the Vedic view entirely. Rather, he kept its key elements, taking conventions such as "dharma," "samsara" (and liberation from it), and "karma" out of the service of social status and putting them into the service of ethics; that is, he told a new story. The Buddha even maintained the ideal of "being a Brahmin," but he redefined that status from one of caste to one of moral integrity. The Buddha repurposed ritual to ethical ends in a similar way when, for example, he founded the monastic community.

Bellah can at times seem to be giving a long-winded answer without a question. Throughout the book, you have the sense that there is a lion of a moral imperative lurking in the shadows. Occasional rustlings sound, as when he writes, "Technological advance at high speed combined with moral blindness about what we are doing to the world's societies and to the biosphere is a recipe for rapid extinction. The burden of proof lies on anyone who would say it is not so." From time to time, a paw extends visibly from the bushes, then retreats. Bellah states, "Modernity is on trial," but continues, "I cannot in this book give an account of that trial. All I can do is call up some very important witnesses." Once, the lion roars. "Some have suggested that we are in the midst of a second axial age, but if we are, there should be a new cultural form emerging. Maybe I am blind, but I don't see it. What I think we have is a crisis of incoherence and a need to integrate in new ways the dimensions we have had since the axial age."

The "need to integrate" is clearly the answer (hence deep and wide history); the "crisis of incoherence" must be the question. But then, in what way have we stopped making sense?

It takes a little reading between the lines, but a sense of the problem begins to emerge. Theory has spun loose from our other modes of knowing. (It is worth noting that theory itself is not the problem for Bellah—nor is science. Bellah isn't anti-reason. The problem is in the *spinning loose*.) "Once disengaged theory becomes possible, then theory can take another turn: it can abandon any moral stance at all and look simply at what will be useful, what can make the powerful and exploitative even more so." This abandoning of a moral stance in turn sets a stage: "Theory in the sense of disengaged knowing, inquiry for the sake of understanding, with or without moral evaluation…has given humans the power to destroy their environment and themselves." When theory gone

rogue also becomes the only kind of meaning-making that counts, then we are radically, deeply, and dangerously dislocated.

Since theory is the source of trouble here, the crisis of incoherence is not going to be solved by coming up with a new theory, any more than alcoholism could be cured by inventing a new kind of drink. But more than that, this is actually not a problem on the order of theory, not a problem of the type that could be corrected with more knowledge: new facts, or a convincing argument. It is a problem in self-understanding. The correction needed is on the order of self-transformation. And that requires a *therapeutic* process—which is the domain of *narrative*, of *story*.

"Narrative is at the heart of our identity," as Bellah understands it. "The self is a telling." Personal and social identity reside not in our theories about the world but in our stories. Bellah knows well the difference between theory and narrative, and the types of power each hold. He is well aware that mythic sensibility is still operating within us (remember, "nothing is ever lost"). But Bellah is working within the conventions of his profession. Theory is the only authoritative discourse available to him as a social scientist. So he does something tricky, and herein lies brilliance. Using theory, Bellah tells a new story about theory and, by doing so, shows a way to Ricoeur's second naiveté.

Employing the tools of history and science, Bellah simultaneously undermines our unexamined confidence in the absolute authority of reason and increases our confidence in other kinds of truth. By putting the rise of theoretic culture in the context of earlier periods of cultural history, he exposes both the historical contingency of rational knowing and its indebtedness to, and grounding in, its genealogical predecessors. Then he demonstrates that even in an individual, the ability to think abstractly comes only after enactive and symbolic knowledge give us

something to think abstractly about; in this view of human development, we are first embodied knowers, then storytellers, and only then analytic thinkers. Reason comes not first but last—it is the newest member of an established team, not the captain but a co-player.

Having reorganized our different ways of knowing meaning under the metanarrative of evolution and history, the past, our traditions, "speak again." *And we start to be able to hear them*. With this, one recognizes that the book doesn't just *say* a lot of things; it *does* something. It doesn't just *tell* us how we came to be; it *shows* us who we are.

We start to be able to enter into these axial worlds, and we resonate with the character of each as though seeing it from the inside. Indeed, Bellah admits, "In the course of writing this book, which is a history of histories, and a story of stories, I have become involved with many of the stories I recount to the point of at least partial conversion." Upon leaving the axial worlds, we return home and see our own world anew—we understand in a different way what it means to have religion, a belief system, or a worldview. Having a religion is not like carrying around a map of true or false propositions that we hold up against reality. Rather, meaning systems are embodied and contingent: what we can think or believe is utterly bounded by what we can say and do—and what we can think, say, and do all shape each other. And further, all these possibilities are shaped by our biology, society, and culture.

This shift in self-understanding has implications beyond a newfound respect for the myths, symbols, and rituals of our own tradition. As long as we misunderstand the nature of our own religion, we will also fail to understand the nature of the religions of others. If we imagine *our* religion to be a set of stand-alone theories, we will imagine *theirs* to be just theories too. And, of course, our theories will be the right ones; theirs, the wrong ones. But if we can pull off this shift of perspective—accom-

plished not just by learning a new idea but having a new insight—"that we are all in this, with our theories, yes, but with our practices and stories, together," a new kind of capacity unfolds to understand the world and find meaning in it. Not a breakthrough on the order of the axial, perhaps, but at the very least, new hope for finding commonalities, and accommodating and perhaps even appreciating differences. Maybe we will even discover a new understanding of what sameness and difference could mean. Bellah would seem to be right: religion is, indeed, in evolution.

3

WHAT'S AT STAKE AS THE DHARMA GOES MODERN?

An exploration of the background assumptions of the modern age and the unique challenges they present

AUGUST 2012

In the summer of 2010, I sat a Dzogchen retreat at Garrison Institute with my teacher, a well-known Tibetan lama. He gave teachings during the day and then in the evening handed the microphone over to several academic luminaries who were also attending. In the morning and afternoon we received instructions on attaining buddhahood; in the evenings we heard lectures on how Buddhism's contact with the West was leading to cutting-edge advances in brain-science research, medicine, and psychology.

One hot night—this was July in New York State—a professor was addressing the excited crowd about developments in medicine based on laboratory studies of meditators. Maybe I was strung out on the heat, maybe it was the effect of keeping silence or of sitting over the course of days with an accomplished master, but something hijacked my better judgment, and when question-and-answer time came I raised my hand.

As I asked my question, the buzz in the room came to a sudden stop.

For what seemed a very long time, there was dead silence. One hundred pairs of eyes turned toward me and stared. A few people fidgeted. Somebody laughed.

This was my question: "Given the depth of suffering in samsara and the possibility of a solution to it; given that the very texts we study outline a path to that solution; given that we have a realized master right here who is, we believe, capable of leading us on that path to that solution—why would we devote our precious human lives to exploring whether meditation can lower blood pressure?"

At least some of my fellow Buddhists who stared at me across the meditation hall were, I am pretty sure, puzzled at my puzzlement. Perhaps more than a few imagined they were meeting a Buddhist fundamentalist. Others might have considered me just naive, scientifically uneducated, or even rude.

But however clumsy my attempt, I was trying to put my finger on was a very real tension, a discord between what our Tibetan teacher had been saying and what the community seemed to be hearing. It was visible right there in the structure of the retreat, palpable in the response to my question, and familiar—at least to me, and I imagine to others as well—in everyday practice. This tension points to an issue of key significance in the transplantation and adaptation of the dharma to the modern West, to what is an often overlooked and important difference between Buddhism as it has been traditionally practiced and Buddhism as it is practiced in the West today.

The experience of being a modern Western Buddhist is different from the experience of all previous Buddhists in one crucial respect: we are contending with a radically different environment of faith. In discussions about Buddhism's transmission to the West, most of the discussion about belief has focused on particular beliefs. What has been

off our radar for the most part is an appreciation of the very different background of assumptions within which belief itself—both ours and that of traditional Buddhists—is construed.

This difference has been overlooked not because it is unimportant but because it is hard to see. It is operating at a level that is implicit, and therefore hidden. But our failure to acknowledge it threatens to sabotage a rich and meaningful dialogue with Buddhist tradition and in so doing to hinder significantly the fullness of Buddhism's transmission to the West.

We know this difference by its telltale sign—that familiar tension. It shows up most vividly when we consider big themes: how we understand the central project of Buddhism—the nature of our selves and our problem, and the purpose and possibilities of our practice. For example, for the first time in history, to suggest today in some Buddhist circles that the purpose of Buddhism is *exactly what the traditional texts tell us it is*—which is to say, that it is concerned with the transcendent—can be to come across sounding like a rube or to meet with condescension.

"Enlightenment" and "liberation" are tricky terms, and Buddhists have argued about what exactly they mean since the time of the Buddha. Nonetheless, all traditions throughout Buddhist history have identified our problem with reference to samsara—the cycle of birth, suffering, death, and rebirth. The motivation for practice was to transcend that cycle—or to help others to do so. At the very least, a Buddhist might strive to attain a better rebirth as a step on the way. While the practice of dharma may (and often does) bring some comfort, enjoyment, and even happiness in this life, the seeking of these states has always been the very definition of what is *not* dharma practice. We seek these naturally, no practice required.

Consider then how strange it is that in modern Western Buddhism

transcendent goals have become, for the most part, optional, and on top of that, they can oftentimes be—as I became more and more acutely aware, the longer I held the mike while the silence dragged on—the harder option to embrace. Meeting our religion head-on—by studying root texts and commentaries, participating in its ritual life, or adopting Buddhist narratives and doctrines—can even be regarded as anachronistic and naive.

I'd like to suggest that this difference is due not to culture or geography, as our commonly used "transplant and adapt" metaphor assumes; it is due to a difference in epoch. In entering modernity, Buddhism has crossed a boundary of a nature entirely different from any geographical, linguistic, and cultural barriers it has navigated historically. Buddhism has entered a secular age, and that's not just new soil—it's a whole new ecosystem.

To understand why this phase of dharma's evolution is an unprecedented shift, it is necessary to look very closely at the nature of the dharma's new secular environment. We might tend to think of secularism in terms of the separation of church and state. Depending on your perspective, this may seem like a positive development, and indeed, in many respects it is. The post-Enlightenment purge of religion from political institutions and public life and the dismantling of some ecclesiastical hierarchies have gone hand in hand with the rise of democracy and egalitarian values, including the protection of beliefs. Today, we who live in modern secular societies can, in principle, believe what we want—including Buddhism—or we can choose not to believe in any religion at all. So far, so good.

But there is a much deeper level of secularism. Our secular age is marked off from the earlier period of religious life not only by changes in belief but also, more profoundly, by shifts in the very *preconditions* of be-

lief, the background within with both belief and disbelief are construed. Secularism in this sense sets the parameters, the limit conditions, for what kinds of crops can thrive in modernity's field of spiritual possibilities. It sets zone conditions: first frost, temperature lows, rainfall highs.

To get a sense of how radically different this ecosystem is from any to which Buddhism has adapted in the past, it is illuminating to draw on recent scholarship by the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor, a leader in the fields of secular studies and the history of subjectivity. Taylor's field-defining book *A Secular Age* (2007) traces the development of Western secular modernity from its roots in Latin Christendom.

Imagine for a moment living in Europe 500 years ago. How might you have experienced your moral, spiritual, or religious world? What might your sense of self have been like? Religion was then built into the very fabric of social, political, and private life—much as it has been, and in some cases still is, in Asian Buddhist cultures. The existence of God was not a belief you held; it was, quite simply and axiomatically, *the way things were*. In this "enchanted" worldview, people experienced an environment permeated with God's presence and with moral forces, including demons and spirits—a world in which power could hang out in objects like statues or relics, and sacred presence could be, as Taylor writes, "enacted in ritual, seen, felt touched, walked toward (in pilgrimage)." To be a person in this world was to be in interaction with these forces, both accessible and vulnerable to them. Taylor calls this type of subjectivity "porous." For such people, there was, claims Taylor, "no distinction between experience and its construal." In other words, in a world where ghosts are real, to see a ghost is to see a ghost, not to believe you see one.

But this changed in modernity. Our world became, in the sociologist Max Weber's famous term, "disenchanted." Cartesian dualism and

the rise of science chased the spooks from their haunts "out there" into a newly understood "in here." In this newly constituted (Taylor calls it "buffered") sense of self, we modern people experience moral forces both beneficent and demonic as private, internal happenings, not as facts about our world. Our "natural" world is indifferent, value-neutral. For the first time in world history, people do not live in meaning; meaning lives in us.

Secular people sense the world to be self-sufficient and impersonal: our post-Galilean universe is governed by natural laws. We see our societies as human, not divine, creations; we follow moral laws put in place by people, not God. Our very frame of reference for making sense of our world and for participating in it is thus an "immanent frame," says Taylor. Half a millennium ago, we couldn't have made sense of the world without God; now it's hard to make sense of it with him. The pre-Reformation experiences of being a believer or disbeliever are no longer available to modern people because the background context of belief has fundamentally shifted. Taylor holds that the modern age is an "entirely new context." In this sense, he says, "secularity has to be described as the possibility or impossibility of certain kinds of experience in our age."

In this new ecosystem of secularism, a new form of spiritual life is flourishing. To recognize it, it helps to note that religious sensibility comes in two types. One type of sensibility (Taylor calls it "closed") understands the highest good and deepest sources of meaning to be located within this world; the other sensibility—an "open one"—seeks connection to the sacred in something beyond. In other words, says Taylor, all modern people living in the secular West share a common immanent frame of reference, but we can live within it either open or closed to the possibility of something beyond. In the history of religious life, this closed kind of religious sensibility is a newcomer. Until modernity, it

wasn't conceivable that the quotidian here-and-now could be all there was, so it was likewise unintelligible to imagine that a life lived meaningfully could orient itself in a fulfilling way to strictly immanent goals. Today, not only can we conceive of doing such a thing; we're doing it en masse. The emergence of this new closed spiritual possibility marks the key difference between earlier times and the secular age.

To put this in Buddhist terms, in modern Western Buddhism, for the first time in Buddhist history, it is now possible to construe the purpose of dharma practice as the improvement of one's psychological well-being or physical health, as a means to experience more harmony in one's relationships, or as a way to build a more equitable, kind, and peaceful society. In this materialist-compatible version of Buddhism, death is the end, so the only problems are here and now. An endless cycle of birth, suffering, death, and rebirth doesn't exist, so freedom from it is not a coherent goal. In today's science-based world, a buddha's omniscient cognition or emanative forms seem, frankly, superstitious—part of an ignorant and outdated worldview no more relevant to modern people than ghosts or demons.

In contrast to this closed form of Buddhism, there remains an open one, in which Western Buddhist practitioners still strive for transcendent goals that once made sense within a traditional Buddhist world but that seem oddly incoherent against the backdrop of our daily secular lives. These spiritual practitioners (I include myself among them) experience a normative pull from the secular environment that makes it hard for us to take transcendent goals seriously, even as we actively practice to attain them. Those who seek transcendence in the context of the immanent frame have a brand-new disadvantage, one that Milarepa or Dogen never had to overcome. We have to perform a tug-of-war with ourselves that was never required of our spiritual predecessors. For Milarepa, to

strive for awakening was to throw his weight *toward* the collective sense of cosmic order into which he was born. We, on the other hand, have to pull *against* ours. Our conviction can thus be double-headed. Like Dr. Dolittle's pushmi-pullyu, many of us progress on our spiritual path two-steps-forward-one-step-back: straining ahead toward our highest spiritual aspirations, drawn back by socially inculcated common sense. We don't have the wind at our back.

Wanting to eliminate the tension drives some practitioners to adhere to tradition in the manner of fundamentalists. They retreat from the complexities of modernity into an anachronistic fantasy. Others think redefining "awakening" will resolve the tension: they reconstrue the problem so as not to reference samsara, assuming that recasting the problem won't change the solution. Still others take on traditional Buddhist beliefs, but in so doing they extract these beliefs from the traditional Buddhist background context that supported them, and try to insert them into a modern secular background with which they are incompatible. It's as if these practitioners are trying to run software designed for Windows on a Mac.

Any of these convert Buddhist practitioners might have deeply transforming experiences. But because these experiences will occur against the backdrop of the view of self understood as private, walled-off, and interior, and the view of meaning as inhering within the mind, such experiences will then likely be understood as private, psychological states, brain states, or states of consciousness, or even as personal achievements. It must then be asked, might not such an approach end up reinforcing and vindicating a self-experience that is a product of secular modernity? And because these experiences will occur against the backdrop of the view of the self as autonomous—rather than contingent—might they not further strengthen an already problematic misapprehen-

sion of the nature of the self that our texts tell us is the precise point of Buddhist practice to abandon?

Seen in this light, the adaptation of Buddhism to the West has two aspects. On the one hand, there is the rising popularity of a closed sensibility of dharma practice—one in which we have made a clear break with all previous Buddhist traditions, relocating techniques and teachings from a background context in which they served transcendent goals into one in which they serve immanent ones. On the other hand, there is an open sensibility of dharma practice in which practitioners navigate a deep incongruity between their practice and how their world is construed; where conviction struggles to plant a foothold for leverage against a strong counter-pull of doubt; and in which one must wonder and then ask, are the transcendent experiences of liberation and enlightenment, traditionally the core goals of Buddhist life, no longer possible for us?

If we are to push on the "transplant and adapt" metaphor for the transmission of the dharma to the West, we ought to be ever on the alert for another very real possibility it entails. We know from evolutionary biology that sometimes a species adapts to a point where it is no longer recognizable as itself, as happened 400 million years ago when the first animals made their way from ocean to land. Swimmers morphed into crawlers, and thus new species emerged. As we reflect on the nature of the transmission to date, we should be asking ourselves some very difficult questions. If we think of the dharma as a form of spiritual life, has the nature of its adaptation to a secular modernity changed it unrecognizably? Is modern dharma a new species? If so, in what sense can we then consider our dialogue with tradition authentic or our transmission successful?

If you operate within a closed dharma sensibility, the question might

seem puzzling. It might seem like I've just asked something nonsensical—like, now that we know the world is round, have I lost the opportunity of jumping from its edge? Or maybe you're thinking this closed form of Buddhism is a new species. And that's a good thing! We've shrugged off all that superstition about reincarnation and karma, ghosts and demons, visions and relics—got the bugs out of the belief system. We've updated to Dharma 2.0.

Certainly it is true that throughout history Buddhism has always changed and adapted as it has moved from one culture to another. And we too, of course, have to make the dharma suit our culture—adapt it in a way that is authentic and relevant to our lives. We've worked hard to equalize institutional hierarchies and address women's rights, for example. But Western converts have also used this justification to "update versions": to omit or reinterpret doctrines that seem supernatural—like rebirth or karma, liberation or enlightenment; to downplay modes of knowing outside the bounds of instrumental reason—such as symbols and myths; and to discard practices that seem adventitious—like rituals. Here is why it is important to appreciate that there is more to Buddhism than a set of beliefs or tenets and to understand that beliefs are rooted within a context of implicit background assumptions that gives them sense, meaning, and force. If we fail to recognize the existence and importance of background context, we will consequently fail to see what is unprecedented about the transmission of Buddhism to the West. While Buddhism is indeed crossing between cultures, it is not doing only that: In entering secular modernity, it is also jumping historical epochs, and that makes for a much wider chasm. Buddhism is being pulled into the background contexts not just of Western culture but also of secular modernity—and in terms of the survival of a religion, the latter is a new and especially problematic threshold.

Updating the dharma to fit with our secular mindset isn't simply change on the order of dress and manners. We're not talking different taste or customs here. It is an attempt to fix the dharma, to make it *right*, which is to say, scientific. From the perspective of scientific naturalism, it makes sense to do this, because when one operates within that perspective, it seems that only *believers* are making leaps of faith. Secular humanists assume themselves to be commitment-free rationalists. But that is a profound misunderstanding. To assume "this is all there is" is also to make a leap of faith.

What is so difficult for us all to see is that we too have a worldview. We simply assume that the world we call "natural" is the *only* world, that the way we experience and think about things is the way things exist from their own side. Coupled with that assumption is another one: now we've got it *right*. Secular modernity has sloughed off the false beliefs and superstitions of our ancestors and uncovered the real truth, which is hard scientific fact. Taylor calls this progress myth a "subtraction story." These are powerful biases, hard to shake, not because they are true but because they feel so self-evident.

Reflect on the earlier discussion of the porous/buffered self and the enchanted/disenchanted world. Consider that the self, its environment, the possible relationship between the self and its environment, and the type of knowledge available to a particular kind of self in a particular kind of environment are all culturally construed and historically contingent. They cannot, therefore, be "objective" facts.

When we assume that our secular worldview is de facto true, we are confusing *conditions for* reality with *features* of it. This is a little like setting our online newsfeed parameters so that we just get local news, and then coming to the conclusion that all news is local. In exactly the same way, immanence is a precondition for what can count as real in secular

modernity. Western convert Buddhists often tend to mistake this background assumption for a feature of reality, and then as a consequence have a hard time making sense of transcendence, which was, by definition, just ruled out.

Before it arrived in Western secular modernity, Buddhism never had to reckon with transcendence being problematic in this way. No previous Buddhist culture construed objectivity and subjectivity as we do, so neither did our predecessors banish values, purpose, and meaning to inner space—nor could they have conceived of spiritual or moral life as just a matter of personal choice or subjective judgment. To be unaware that reality has moral and spiritual dimensions has always meant, as our texts tell us, that one is out of touch with how things are. To ignore reality's moral and spiritual imperatives has a consequence—continued suffering. Buddhist practice, in its traditional context, is the alignment of oneself more and more deeply with the cosmic order. Transcendence occurs when that coming into alignment is complete. In this paradigm, transcendence isn't ruled out by the definition of the real. It is the definition of the real.

Even among worldviews, which are all convincing to their adherents, secular humanism combined with scientific materialism has a particularly compelling normative force. The success of instrumental reason in producing vast wealth, status, and power combined with obvious scientific and technological advances allows us to believe that this style of thinking and its discipline of science are not just efficacious but also indubitably and solely true. By these standards, other worldviews and other modes of knowing are unable to justify themselves and therefore seem invalid. But failure to satisfy the criteria by which secular modernity measures success is not a shortcoming of other worldviews and other modes of knowing; it is simply a result of applying our own

criteria outside their ken. For the past 100 years, scholars across fields ranging from philosophy and cultural anthropology to the history of science, sociology, literary studies, and linguistics have questioned the assumptions that constitute the immanent frame. Unpacking why the immanent frame's subtraction story spin is so convincing has been and continues to be an urgent challenge for modern thinkers who are concerned about the ethical implications of unbridled individualism let loose in a value-neutral world.

The point here is not that a traditional Asian worldview (or some other) is right and ours is wrong, but that our secular and materialist convictions block us in certain critical ways from participating in what has always constituted a Buddhist form of life. Much of the meaning of a religion is conveyed in its symbols, rituals, and myths. Consider how our privileging of rational knowing gets in our way.

Reason is concerned with literal meaning—that is, "x is y." Symbolic knowing is concerned with metaphorical meaning: "x *is like* y." Thus, while reason hones in on facts, symbols explore *relations*. Reason demands one-to-one correspondence: either water is H_20 or it isn't. In contrast, symbols work with *multifaceted* meaning; the water offered on a Tibetan altar is at once flowers, incense, and light. Symbols govern intricate *patterns* of meaning. They condense many meanings into one. They expand one meaning into many. And they can even hold together discordant or contradictory meanings.

From the point of view of instrumental reason, ritual seems like purposeless action. But ritual too is working with another kind of knowing—the sense in which we know the floor is solid and the walls obstructive, which we discover by finding our way around—by walking on the floor or bumping into the wall. This type of knowledge is not theoretical in nature; it is how we live. And ritual can shape that level of meaning,

articulate it in definite ways. Ritual doesn't represent meaning like rational propositions do; it enacts it. Bowing to the Buddha, for example, isn't just how you think about your faith; it is how you go about attaining it and how you live it.

Again, from the perspective of reason, myths are just bad theories or wrong propositions. But narratives can deeply shape our understanding—both intellectual and intuitive. They are deeply interwoven in our identities and can pull strings on our motivations—ask any psychotherapist, politician, or advertiser. Or ask yourself: Why do you practice Buddhism? Your answer will be a story.

Our Buddhist tradition is like a meaning-symphony in which symbols, rituals, myths, and beliefs harmonize and counterpoint. Reducing the dharma to a system of rational beliefs and associated meditative techniques and discarding the rest is like covering one's ears so that only the percussion beats through. Listening to our tradition in that manner, we can't even tell what piece is playing. If then, on top of that, we toss out Buddhist beliefs that don't fit with materialism, it's as if we are only hearing that percussion line as a beat we already know. Is this an authentic dialogue with tradition? In what way are we to learn something new?

Certainly we cannot turn the clock back. There is no returning to a presecular world. We must reckon with our secular scientific background. What, then, is the way forward?

There are no easy answers. We might begin, however, by confronting our biases—indeed, our chauvinisms: our presumption that science has got it all figured out; that the modern worldview is a triumph over all past forms of understanding; and that today we are closer to a truer understanding of ourselves and our world than people of any other place and time. We need to start examining the immanent frame's background assumptions, which constrain our sense of the possible. As we

hold each assumption up for examination—as we pull it from the background and into the foreground and subject it to analysis—something curious happens. In a certain sense it loses its power over us—its status as "the way things are"—and becomes one possible way among many ways that things could be.

Examining and even questioning the foundational assumptions of secular and scientific materialism doesn't mean we stop doing science or stop living in a technological world. Rather, it means we begin to see our worldview as a worldview, to appreciate how it, too, came to be constituted on the basis of a number of sleights of hand and is, as a result, no more universal or final or resting on solid ground than the worldviews of our medieval Western or traditional Buddhist predecessors. Like their worldviews, ours is a set of conventions. We can then understand that this is what it means to have a worldview: the human form of life operates within a vast web of implicit background understandings that limit what can count as valid beliefs and experiences.

The distinction between explicit beliefs and their implicit background context has been a critical one in our own Western philosophical tradition for the last century. Many of our most prominent thinkers—from Wittgenstein to Kuhn up to Taylor—have called attention to its importance and the problems that arise when it is overlooked. Although the understanding of background context emerged in the West, its implications lead us back home to one of the core teachings of Buddhist tradition: the two truths. When we as Buddhists consider that all our experiences, along with the objects of our experiences—and even subjectivity and objectivity themselves—arise within the context of implicit background assumptions, we recognize what we call "conventional truth." When we consider that therefore, as a consequence, no worldview can appeal to the objects of its own creation for its own

validation—that no worldview rests on solid ground in this sense—we recognize "ultimate truth," emptiness.

At some moment it could hit us that the liberative possibilities spoken of in Buddhist texts may not be superstitious fairy tales. They may be real possibilities. For the first time it may seem plausible, indeed credible, that just as our form of human life gave rise to the material accomplishments toward which it directed its aspirations—skyscrapers and Internet technology and the like—so too might another form of human life, operating within different background assumptions, with different aspirations and *with an understanding of its own conventional nature*, be capable of giving rise to spiritual accomplishments like liberation and enlightenment. Then with courage and genuine humility we might begin to look at our job as dharma pioneers differently. Our cutting-edge task is not to fit Buddhism into our world. Nor is it to adapt ourselves to fit a world that is no longer available to us as it might have been to our ancestors. It is to reach across a great chasm and to meet our tradition in a new place where it—and we—have never been before.

4

MEDITATION NATION

How convincing is the science driving the popularity of mindfulness meditation? A Brown University researcher has some surprising answers.

APRIL 2014

Given the widespread belief that meditation practice is scientifically certified to be good for just about everything, the results of a recent major analysis of the research might come as some surprise. Conducted by the Association for Health and Research Quality (AHRQ)—a government organization that oversees standards of research—the meta-study found only moderate evidence for the alleviation of anxiety, depression, and pain, and low to insufficient evidence to suggest that meditation relieved stress, improved mood, attention, or mental-health-related quality of life, or had a substantial impact on substance use, eating habits, sleep, or weight. It looks like the scientific evidence for the benefits of meditation aren't as solid as many might claim.

If it is indeed proven that meditation works for some purposes but not for others, in what sense does scientific proof translate into proof of its liberative efficacy? Does any of this scientific research prove that what we do as Buddhists works? And as Buddhists, why should we care about the science?

For an insider's perspective on these questions, *Tricycle* turned to

clinical psychologist, neuroscience researcher, and Buddhist practitioner Willoughby Britton. Assistant Professor of Psychiatry and Human Behavior at Brown University Medical School, Britton specializes in research on meditation in education and as treatment for depression and sleep disorders, and has long focused on sorting out confusion about meditation within the realm of science. Responding to the first AHRQ meta-study of meditation (2007), which observed the imprecision of scientists' understandings of words like "mindfulness" in interpreting and correlating study results, Britton won National Institutes of Health backing to create standards for consistent terminology in research. She is currently studying the underlying neurobiology of how and why particular practices seem to work better (or worse) for particular kinds of people.

Britton is also one of first researchers to explore possible adverse effects of meditation. In a groundbreaking study known as "The Varieties of Contemplative Experience" project, she is interviewing dozens of advanced meditation practitioners, teachers, and Buddhist scholars regarding what she calls "difficult or challenging mind (or body) states" that can occur as a result of intensive meditation practice. Her observations have been cautionary, highlighting the need to develop a more nuanced and informed view of (and also more respect for) the power of meditation.

—L.H.

As a scientist and as a Buddhist, what do you make of the AHRQ report? The report sounds pretty fair. This review—and pretty much every one before it—has found that meditation isn't any better than any other kind of therapy.

The important thing to understand about the report is that they

were looking for active control groups, and they found that only 47 out of over 18,000 studies had them, which is pretty telling: it suggests that there are fewer than 50 high-quality studies on meditation.

What are active control groups and why are studies based on them of higher quality?There are different levels of scientific research, different levels of rigor. I think this is a place where the public could use a lot of education. Because they don't know how to interpret science, they assume much higher levels of evidence.

The first level is a "pre-post" study, which looks something like this: We go learn to meditate for eight weeks and at the end of it we feel better. We took a stress and anxiety scale before and after, and our stress or anxiety improved. So we say, "Meditation helped me!" That is actually not a valid conclusion. The conclusion you can make in science is that *something* helped. We didn't control for the idea that just deciding to do something is going to help. Just that factor—intentionally deciding to make a commitment to your health and well-being—can make a big difference.

One problem is that just filling out the questionnaire changes you. In my recent sleep study, I had people fill out a questionnaire and keep a sleep diary. That is all they did for eight weeks. They didn't meditate. And their sleep improved a lot. So you have to control for the effect of taking the questionnaires.

You also have to control for the passage of time. Sometimes people just feel better after two months compared with when they started. So you can't actually conclude that meditation had anything to do with it. A lot of the studies on meditation are pre-post studies like this. They shouldn't count at all as evidence.

The next level of rigor is "wait-list controls." Half the participants

begin meditating immediately while the other half acts as a control group and only later participates in the actual meditation. Those in the control group might be thinking, "I'm in the study. I'm going to learn to meditate!" They're psyched. Their depression is already getting better because they've decided to do something about it. These are effects of expectation; they aren't doing meditation.

But even at this level the study is not considered in any way conclusive. If I have an inspiring teacher, for example, it can be a helpful factor that is not meditation. Even to know that somebody felt depressed and anxious at one point and then got better is helpful. There's the normalization of my symptoms. There's the social support. I meet other people who have my problem. I thought I was the only person in the world who had anxiety, and now there are all these other people who have anxiety and we're all talking about it. And I really get along with them. So I'm making friends. I'm less lonely. That's not meditation either. There are all these things that are not meditation that could be helping me feel better.

If we really want to be able to say that meditation was the active ingredient, the control group has to do everything the other group is doing except meditation, and they can't know that they are in the control group. This level of scientific study is called "active control groups." But that largely isn't what is happening in meditation research, although it's starting to happen.

Why do people conduct pre-post studies if they don't count as evidence? A lot of times they are not really doing research. They are running a clinic and they want to see if the clinic is having any beneficial effects. For example, the Center for Mindfulness gives people some questionnaires when they sign up for the mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) program, and the participants fill them out on the last day and

hand them in. It is better than nothing, but it's not the same thing as having participants randomly assigned to either MBSR or a control group.

It is not that these sorts of studies are worthless. They are valuable at different stages of the game. When you are first starting out and wondering if something works, you measure pre-post. At early stages, that level of rigor is appropriate. But it is not appropriate for as much hype as "We should give this to children" or "We should give this to everyone." You need a much higher level of evidence for that.

Public enthusiasm is outpacing scientific evidence. The public perception of where the research stands is way higher than the actual level.

Have the claims for the scientific evidence supporting the efficacy of meditation been overstated by proponents of meditation? Definitely. Because they take all those studies that I was just describing (like pre-post studies) as evidence. You really shouldn't cite those as evidence.

Are meditation researchers perhaps a bit biased? When we first started research on meditation, there was this principle that the scientists should be meditators because they understood it. But we are all also incredibly biased! Meditation is not just a practice we do, like "I like to run." It is an entire worldview and religion. I worry about this kind of bias in meditation research.

There are many people doing studies who are making money off of some kind of meditation-based program, and that is technically considered a conflict of interest. They have something to gain by finding a positive effect, and thus are not one hundred percent objective. When an experimenter is also the person who created the therapy, a factor called "experimenter allegiance" can count for a larger effect than the treatment itself. That is something we haven't looked at in our field.

In the Buddhist community, a lot of people are excited about the scientific findings that support the efficacy of meditation because it seems to be confirming what we already knew. But that is not the purpose of science—to confirm the dharma. And if that is what people are doing as scientists, they need to seriously step back and look at the ethics of that. To use science to prove your religion or worldview—there is something really wrong with that.

Do you see that happening in the world of science? I'll talk about myself so I don't point fingers. My first ten years of practice, when I was also a researcher, I was in that bright-faith phase of "Meditation can fix everything! Everybody should do it!" I wrote a mega-article, the precursor to my dissertation, on all of the neurological and biological concomitants to stress and depression. And then I cited all of the studies that suggested meditation could reverse those processes. And I submitted that mega-article to three different journals and it got rejected three times. It finally dawned on me that I was cherry-picking the data. I wasn't actually being a scientist or doing a scientific review; I was writing a persuasive essay. I think that is much more common. Our natural bias to confirm our own worldview is very much at work. People are finding support for what they believe rather than what the data is actually saying. Ironically, we need a lot of mindfulness to "see clearly" the science of mindfulness.

This is why these meta-analyses are important. They reviewed over 18,000 articles. They were not cherry-picking.

Is the data better for some applications of meditation than others? I have done very careful reviews of the efficacy of meditation in two areas in which there are high levels of popular misconception about how

much data we have: sleep and education. The data for sleep, for example, is really not that strong. And the AHRQ article concurs: it judges the level of evidence for meditation's ability to improve sleep as "insufficient."

What I found from my study was that meditation made people's brains more awake. From a very basic brain point of view, what happens in your brain when you fall asleep? The frontal cortex deactivates. Nobody agrees what meditation does to the brain, but across the board, one of the most common findings is that meditation increases blood flow and activity in the prefrontal cortex. So how is that going to improve sleep? It doesn't make any sense. It is completely incompatible with sleeping if you are doing it right. And we know that people stop sleeping when they go on retreats. That is never reported in scientific publications, even though it is well known among practitioners.

This is a very interesting example of the confusion that arises in the confluence between modern secular and traditional Buddhist contexts. In the buddhadharma, meditation is never used to promote sleep. It is for waking up. Sleep is a hindrance. Often in the modern use of meditation for everything—and especially here in the case of sleep—we're using meditation in ways basically the opposite of what Buddhists were using it for. People aren't trying to dismantle themselves: they want a stronger sense of self; they want more self-esteem; they want more sensuality.

In a study I'm doing on the "Varieties of Contemplative Experience," people are having all kinds of unexpected meditation effects, and it's scaring the hell out of them. Many of the meditators in my studies in clinical settings are reporting classic meditation side effects like depersonalization. De-repression of traumatic memories is another really common one. People have all this energy running through them; they are having spasms and involuntary movements; they are seeing lights. They check themselves into psychiatric hospitals. Some of the people I've

seen in my study come from a health and medicine framework and are not Buddhist, and yet they are reporting meditation effects that are well-documented in Buddhist texts. But these are not well-documented in the scientific literature because nobody is asking about them. That's the chasm I am trying to bridge.

Not all effects are so adverse. The fact that somebody's sense of self disappears for a second is not necessarily a problem for that person. They might think, "Oh, that was weird." Effects can be transient and mild. But a lot of people have charged emotional material or memories coming up. No MBSR teacher is going to be surprised by that. If you sit down on a cushion and count your breath for two months, all sorts of things—wounds, memories, traumas—are going to come up. It is a very common experience. But there is only a single paper on that, written three decades ago. Catharsis of that sort (what Buddhists call "purification") is just not part of the model. The model is: meditation is going to calm you down.

What are other aspects of the model? I think the term "insight," instead of being insight into the three characteristics [suffering, impermanence, and non-self], is now insight into "my own personal patterns of neurosis." So I think there is maybe a little of the idea that you are facing your demons and getting insight into your patterns, but here "insight" is being used in a very personal way. We could all use that kind of insight, but it's not really Buddhist insight in the traditional sense.

The fact that adopting meditation may be very disruptive to your life, that you might require supplemental therapy, or that you might be a little less functional and lower performing while stuff gets kicked up and you are working through it. . . that is not really in the current marketing scheme.

I think there are a lot of people who think meditation will have a Buddhist effect, even if it is not done in a Buddhist context. What do you think of that? I'm seeing people who came to meditation through MBSR or who are not Buddhist but are meditating "to be happy." They are following their breath or doing a mantra. And then they eradicate their sense of self. They freak out. That is a pretty common experience in my study.

If "getting happy" is the context in which you have adopted meditation, will meditation in fact lead to that end? It might, but the next questions are: What's in the middle? At what price? I think the people who have stuck with meditation for a long time, and who have cultivated some kind of wisdom or enduring change, have paid for it dearly with a lot of pain. It is very hard to extract some sort of enduring positive gain from dharma practice without taking a really thorough look at your own mind. The first step is a very close look at the nature of suffering: seeing what suffering is and getting to know our own suffering. It is through that deep intimacy with our own suffering that there is liberation. It's not like, "Let's take that and put it under the rug and be happy and connected with everyone!" Wisdom and enduring change are born out of really looking at every little piece of your own suffering and how it is generated and held together and maintained. How can it not be painful to do that?

What would you say is the way forward for scientific research on meditation? What would you like to see happen? As my research is showing, along with this mass enthusiasm for meditation has come an epidemic of casualties. That needs to be part of the picture going forward. No more denial. Let's just admit that this is happening and have a mature

support system for it. There needs to be more dialogue and collaboration between Buddhists and dharma teachers and the medical community—clinicians, people with training in all psychiatric problems, but particularly in trauma, which is something not really addressed in traditional Buddhist frameworks.

One of the statistics that blows my mind is that the main delivery system for Buddhist meditation in the modern West isn't Buddhism; it is science, medicine, and schools. There is a tidal wave behind this movement. MBSR practitioners already account for the majority of new meditators, and soon they are going to be the vast majority. If Buddhists want to have any say, they better stop criticizing and start collaborating, working *with* instead of just *against*. Otherwise, they might get left in the dust of the "McMindfulness" movement.

Where would you say we are now in the scientific investigation of meditation? With any new discovery, there is usually some initial craze before it gets too popular, and then there is a backlash. A lot of things that were overhyped get torn down. And whatever is really legitimately true is left standing in the end. So I think we are at the peak of this first phase. There have already been a couple of rounds of criticism.

What kinds of criticism? The biggest criticism is coming from the more traditional Buddhists who think these new applications of mindfulness are a denaturing of the dharma.

A related criticism is: "What is mindfulness?" People still aren't clear about that. What are these different practices? And which practices are best or worst suited to which types of people? When is it skillful to stop meditating and do something else? I think that this is the most logical direction to follow because nothing is good for *everything*. Mindfulness

is *not* going to be an exception to that. A lot of people would probably have a strong reaction to that statement, which tells you something right there. If we think anything is going to fix everything, we should probably take a moment and meditate on that.

5

DON'T BELIEVE THE HYPE

Neuroscientist Catherine Kerr is concerned about how mindfulness meditation research is being portrayed in the media.

OCTOBER 2014

Last May, an article about mindfulness on a popular mainstream news website finally spurred neuroscientist and meditation researcher Catherine Kerr to act. The article cited 20 benefits of meditation, from "reducing loneliness" to "increasing grey matter" to "helping sleep," and painted a picture of meditation as a kind of golden elixir for modern life. Kerr posted the article on her Facebook page. "It is not like any of this is grossly inaccurate," she wrote in her post. "It is just that the studies are too cherry-picked and too positive."

Assistant Professor of Medicine and Family Medicine at Brown University, Kerr directs translational neuroscience for Brown's Contemplative Studies Initiative and leads a mindfulness research program at Providence's Miriam Hospital. She takes no issue with the value of mindfulness practice; Kerr has personally reaped enormous benefit from Mindfulness-based Stress Reduction (MBSR) in a two-decade-long battle with cancer, and as a researcher she has studied the beneficial effects MBSR has had on others. But as a scientist committed to facts,

she was worried. "I think we are all going to need to take responsibility and do something so that the coverage looks slightly more balanced," she wrote to her Facebook friends who are scientists, clinicians, philosophers, and contemplatives in the meditation research community. "Otherwise, when the inevitable negative studies come, this whole wave will come crashing down on us."

Within three days, Kerr's Facebook thread grew to over 100 comments. Kerr founded a Facebook group and moved the discussion there. Today, "Mindfulness and Skillful Action: A Research Discussion Group" is an important rallying point for over 400 prominent academic, scientific, and clinical meditation researchers as well as leaders from the Buddhist community. (The group is now closed to new members.) This Facebook community has been tracking two rapidly diverging discourses: the evolving scientific, scholarly, and clinical consensus and the popular press coverage about that consensus. As the gap between the two widens to what Kerr fears will soon reach a "crisis point," group members are asking themselves and each other what ethical obligations they have to intervene in the popular discourse around meditation. Together they are strategizing about how to tone down the hype to accord with the facts while not, as Kerr commented in one post, throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

Tricycle spoke with Kerr in Providence, Rhode Island, to understand the significance of this emerging meta-discourse—the conversation about the conversation about meditation.

—L.H.

In a recent article in *U.S. News*, you were quoted as saying: "Mindfulness is a science that is just beginning. And there's a

lot of media hype around that." What kind of hype? The *Huffington Post* is the worst offender. The message they deliver becomes a ubiquitous, circulating meme that people put up on their Facebook pages, and that becomes "true" through repetition alone. The *Huffington Post* features mindfulness a lot and tends to represent only the positive findings (and in the most positive light imaginable) rather than offering a balanced reading of the science. They use that approach to justify the idea that every person who has any mental abilities should be doing mindfulness meditation. I don't think the science supports that. The *Huffington Post* has really done mindfulness a disservice by framing it in that way.

How does hyping mindfulness do it a disservice? One of the negative consequences if this wave of hype continues could be that the backlash will be too strong. People will lose faith and revert to the other side: mindfulness has *no* value.

What are some of the popular myths or narratives about mindfulness that scientists would like to correct? Scientists are, for the most part, circumspect about making claims for cures attributed to mindfulness. The science doesn't support that. Scientists know from looking at meditation trials that not every person benefits from mindfulness therapies, but this is something nonscientists seem to have difficulty with. Individuals should not make clinically based decisions based only on neuroscientific studies, because the sample sizes are too small; if you are making an evidence-based decision, it should be from a full picture of the evidence that includes clinical trial data. The clinical trial data on mindfulness for depression relapse, for example, is not a slam-dunk. The results are really not better than those for antidepressants. In general, mindfulness is not orders of magnitude stronger than other things that

people are doing right now to help manage stress and mood disorders. So you have to look at mindfulness in the context of a range of options. Unlike other therapies, mindfulness can be self-led at a certain point—it becomes a practice rather than a therapeutic modality, in the same way that exercise is a training or practice. But mindfulness doesn't work for everything and is not suitable for everyone.

Another popular narrative about MBSR is that it's derived from a two-and-a-half-millennia-old practice. It is very hard to evaluate or falsify that statement or even to figure out what it means. I think it gets assigned way too much weight.

Could you give an example of a scientific result that was oversold by the media? I was the second author in Sara Lazar's 2005 paper "Meditation experience is associated with increased cortical thickness." It is a lovely paper, but its findings were preliminary.

Was this the study that had everyone saying that meditation changes your brain? Yes. It is cited over 800 times in scientific literature. Sara is still interviewed *constantly* about this study. And scientists know that it's a nonrandomized cross-sectional study, which means that the measures are only taken at one time point. So if there is a difference in brain thickness, we don't know if the cause is practice or lifestyle, or if people with thicker brains are simply attracted to mindfulness. To see that something is causing something else, we need to see change over time that's *controlled*. And we don't see that in the paper. But the typical headline in the popular press was "Mindfulness Makes Your Brain Grow."

We also didn't claim that there was a directly measured behavioral benefit in having a thicker brain. (There are actually some conditions

where it's not good to have a thicker brain!) We were really clear about the significance of our findings in our paper, but because the brain is such a fetish and because the idea of growing your brain was so attractive, many media portrayals missed the subtlety entirely.

Sara Lazar's finding has since been replicated. I wasn't totally sure about the results until they were replicated.

So even though the measures were only taken at one point, because it has been replicated the results are still significant? Yes, it has been replicated many times in different ways. It's very exciting for a scientist to have your findings replicated. There's a really significant replication crisis right now in psychological science—especially in social psychology. Many findings that were thought to be canonical—which were in the psychology textbooks and which everyone just thought were true—are not replicable. We can't generate those effects. It's not necessarily the case that the first study was bad, but the gold standard of science is replication.

There's a broader replication crisis in medicine. There is a very famous article about this by John P. A. Ionnidis called "Why Most Published Research Studies Findings are False." In the same vein, a report published in *Nature* reviewed preclinical cancer studies and found that over 80 percent of the findings reported in top journals were nonreplicable. That means we can't trust them. They're likely not true!

Both scientists and scientific laypeople have a lot of trouble with these reports.

Why do you think that is so? We want certainty; we do not like the indeterminacy of not really understanding what is going on. Yet somebody who has a clear scientific understanding knows that the evidence base

is always mixed—it is not a one-hundred-percent, only-positive thing. Mixed into the weave of the science are negative findings and poorly designed studies. The problem is not isolated to mindfulness.

How should scientific laypeople interpret the research on meditation? It's fair to say there are some clues from brain science that meditation might help enhance brain function. That is an evidence-based statement. The mistake is investing one-hundred-percent certainty in a result and not holding a probabilistic view of scientific truth or risk and benefit. When people are making decisions for their own well-being, they need to be able to hold that uncertainty in mind. And they need to understand that the scientific context in which they are making their decisions could be different five years from now. Personally, I don't really make decisions about what to practice based on these small-sample-size studies reported in the media. Many mindfulness scientists are very puzzled by people making decisions based on these small neuroscientific studies.

What kind of evidence *would* it be appropriate to consider in evaluating mindfulness as a therapeutic remedy? Consideration of the concrete experience of doing these practices should be much more central in the discussion. "This is what it feels like to follow your breath for twenty minutes. How do you like it? What did it make you feel like later in the day?" Those seem like the *real* questions, not "What would happen if I threw you in a scanner?"

There are many claimants for attention and funding from the National Insitutes of Health (NIH) and insurance companies. I think it's fair to ask for some objective evidence before you decide to reimburse on something, to have preliminary scientific data before the NIH bestows a

million-dollar grant. That type of demand has its place. The problem is when the volume is turned up too high, when there is an overestimation of what the evidence might really mean. This problem of overestimation is ubiquitous. It is true in statin literature; it true in hormone replacement therapy literature. We thought there were really strong benefits, and they turned out to not be there—sometimes these therapies were even harmful.

Do you think that the researchers themselves are in part responsible for the media hype? The approach in mindfulness science is pretty much aligned with how scientists generally communicate, where, especially in early-stage work, one of your responsibilities is to generate enthusiasm. To get things going, get collaborators, and garner NIH interest, you need to be a little entrepreneurial. There is a real art to expressing something as a theory you want to test and getting people excited about it while making sure they understand that this theory hasn't been proven yet. Researchers have to strike a tricky balance between expressing genuine enthusiasm and cautioning about limitations.

But a lot of times I will clearly say, "I am stating a very exciting hypothesis." When I lay out how the hypothesis might work, listeners grab onto that hypothesis story as though it is true—even though I've said, "It hasn't been proven yet." People don't really know how to hear a story that a scientist is telling *as* a hypothesis. They don't know how to gauge that. The hypothesis somehow registers as "already proven."

Do researchers benefit from the hype? Do they leverage it—intentionally or unintentionally? You can read media coverage of scientists' encounters at public forums and probably find examples where they are making a story a little stronger than the evidence suggests. Mindfulness

didn't invent the problem. It is a big problem in science communication across the board. That is how things work in these TED-style forum talks—it is not about skepticism or careful thinking; it is about who can tell the most dramatic story.

It is very hard for the public to remember a complex story. Part of our job as communicators is to strip the story down. The tricky thing is to determine when we cross a line to become manipulative and not true to the underlying science.

The NIH takes an interest in therapies that are popular and available, so publicity can translate into more NIH funding. Other scientists start to get interested, and that recruits more scientists into the field. It makes our studies seem more interesting and significant because they relate to a phenomenon that people are interested in. So we do benefit. But I don't think that is the main thing that has been driving the hype.

You have called on scholars of contemplative studies to take the lead in starting a critical dialogue about mindfulness. What would that look like? Some important questions to ask are why people want to believe that mindfulness is good in every circumstance, that there are no negative side effects, and that it's derived in a pure way from a 2,500-year-old practice. Why do contemplative practices, especially Asian contemplative practices, seem to elicit this type of positive response? Those are the really interesting cultural questions about the present moment.

What would be your contribution be? I'm very interested in patient narratives—clinical narratives. When I read critiques of mindfulness closely, I see they often don't address the experiences of people who do the practice. Left out of consideration in current critiques of mindful-

ness is people's sincere desire to be happy and to suffer less.

In my brain science course, I bring in examples of what a scientific abstract says and also a news article that reports on it. They are very disconnected from one another. People want ways to reduce suffering and stress, and they have grabbed onto mindfulness like a life jacket. I find that very moving, and I want to take it seriously.

There is a flavor of desperation around some of this hope. I'm sensitized to this from over ten years of research I did on the placebo effect at Harvard Medical School with Ted Kaptchuk, a leader in the field. When people seek help in a medical-therapeutic context, they are often quite desperate for relief.

What is the placebo effect, and does it relate to the healing power of mindfulness? The placebo effect is usually defined, somewhat tortuously, as the sum of the nonspecific effects that are not hypothesized to be the direct mechanism of treatment. For example, having a face-to-face conversation is not hypothesized as what makes psychotherapy work—you could have a face-to-face conversation with anybody. But for some reason, if you go every week to therapy, you are going to get better. But you could talk about the weather! When we perform these rituals with a desire to get better, we often do. We now know that a lot of the positive therapeutic benefit from psychotherapy and from various pain drugs may come from that initial context; it often has nothing to do with the specific treatment that is being offered. It is really just about the person approaching a situation with a sense of hope and being met by something that seems to hold out that hope.

MBSR has tapped into that in a really deep way. What happens to an individual in the course of the eight-week MBSR course is based on this initial motivation to get better. Much of the benefit he or she re-

ceives from MBSR likely comes from that. Participants have complex relationships around their hopes of getting better. There is something very profound about that—something very human.

My sense of this isn't only grounded in my knowledge of mindfulness science and my earlier work on the science of the placebo; I live this. I have had an underlying cancer for 18 years. Qigong and mindfulness have been very helpful to me in managing the side effects of my illness and psychological fluctuations. They may have even helped me manage my immune system. But what is in the foreground for me is that every morning I get up and have a sincere desire to be better.

If someone is aware that the placebo effect may be an important part of why a particular treatment works, will the treatment still work for that person? As someone who is an expert on the placebo effect, can you still be affected? Why wouldn't it? You can't imagine you are healing. If you are healing, you are healing!

Ted Kaptchuk did a great study on "placebos without deception." He recruited people with irritable bowel syndrome and told them: "We have a treatment here that we've already studied. It appears to really help people. It is called 'the placebo.' So I'm going to hand you some pills that have no physiological benefit. But based on our data, we think this will help you." And there was a pretty robust response.

Even though people knew it was a placebo? So you don't need to be under the illusion that you are taking an actual drug? You need something that you are actively doing for yourself. You need to take a pill; you need to get touched—something needs to happen. There needs to be a ritual where there is a transaction of some sort.

The placebo effect is a kind of category mistake. It is what gets left

over when you throw out the effects of the specific treatment. But the minute that you make the placebo a veritable mechanism, it stops being "the placebo effect." It is paradoxical in that way. It has been studied, and it is tractable. It seems like the dynamics of ritual are very important.

Are you saying that if there are two people who are both ill and really want to get better, the one who takes any kind of action has a better chance of recovery? Yes. What is interesting about mindfulness is the way it works with that desire and the simple fact of taking action by doing your homework every day. It enrolls you in a process of which you are very self-aware.

Do you think there is a risk that mindfulness hype preys on that hope people have by giving them a false promise of cure? I've heard reports of people who have abandoned chemotherapy to do mindfulness. I don't know if that has really happened. Certainly there are people who go off their antidepressants or lithium and think that mindfulness is going to manage their serious depression or bipolar disorder. That's a concern we have with the current hype around mindfulness. People might see it as being more active than it really is. It doesn't resolve those situations.

If mindfulness doesn't actually resolve conditions like depression, how does it help? I did a qualitative study of participants in an MBSR course and I found that they appear to follow a trajectory. People show up and they really want relief. They have many different conditions. They are seeking help. They think that maybe this course is going to take away their problems. And the teacher on the first day says that's not what this class is about. This class is about learning how to be present to your own inner life, including distress and suffering that you may have been

avoiding. By weeks four and five, people really get it. They've been sitting and their suffering has not gone away, and there's this profound experience people have in which they realize that maybe just wiping away the suffering is not what this is about. Then people have a lot of generalized distress, and they go through it and end up on the other side. They realize, "I can face that!"

When promoters of mindfulness only focus on its effects on brain mechanisms—and I say this as a brain scientist—they are missing a big part of the story. Similarly, when Buddhist critics of mindfulness attack secularized mindfulness because they are worried it is corrupting the dharma, they too are missing something important. Both are blind to this experiential dimension of what it is like for people in pain to take an MBSR course: you have this very complex process of wanting relief, discovering that this isn't going to take your problems away, and then looking at your problems in a new way. That process is about learning how to tolerate the uncertainty that is our existential problem. We're not sure if we are right; we don't know how things are going to turn out. Living with that uncertainty is really deep! And MBSR and its variants help people with that. I worry that our tendency to parse the world into competing abstractions—scientific reductionism on the one hand and dharma purism on the other—may cause us to miss this hard-to-see qualitative shift that may be the true source of the power of mindfulness.

Do you consider yourself part of the "mindfulness backlash?" I am a cautious member of the backlash, but I am also aware that the backlash can crystalize into ideological rhetoric. People who think of mindfulness as "training their brains" are taking refuge in an idea that has not been proven; they are either unaware of or unable to process the problem of scientific uncertainty. Similarly, people who are concerned that "Mc-

Mindfulness" could be watering down the dharma could also be viewed as ideological and intolerant of the uncertainty that comes with something new. Insistence on surefire answers, whether in science or about a received notion of the dharma, can be an avoidance of the existential problem of uncertainty.

Do you think that there is no place for critics who are saying we should exercise caution about whether we consider this a new form of Buddhism? These are important questions for dharma teachers, but I'm not sure of their social significance beyond committed dharma teachers and students. Viewed in terms of the amount of suffering that is being met by MBSR, the question of whether or not MBSR is Buddhism doesn't really matter.

There are, however, significant questions about how the increasing popularity of secular meditation programs might affect Western Buddhism. How would you recommend that Buddhists meaningfully discuss these issues? It is important for mindfulness critics to be curious about the experiences of people who take these secular mindfulness programs. The questions people need to be asking are not these abstract ones: "Is it scientific?" "Is it true dharma?" The question to ask is: "What does it feel like?" If you go straight to brain circuits or straight to ideology, you are missing that fundamental question—and that curiosity.

6

CONTEXT MATTERS

An interview with Buddhist scholar David McMahan

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When Western Buddhists sit down to meditate, many of us may imagine that we are doing the same thing Buddhists across the globe have done for centuries. We may think we are using the same practices Buddhists have always used to overcome suffering (and probably we hope to attain the same result).

But this is a problematic assumption, not least because it is based on the view that the meaning of Buddhist practice is independent of culture and time.

David McMahan studies the role of social and cultural context in meditation. A professor of religion at Franklin and Marshall College, he is the editor of the recently published volume *Buddhism in the Modern World* and the author of two books, including *The Making of Buddhist Modernism* (which *Tricycle* reviewed in Spring 2012). He is a frequent contributor to scholarly journals, reference works, and anthologies, and participates widely in conferences, seminars, and lectures across the United States and overseas. An expert on Buddhism's encounter with modernity, McMahan suggests that we approach the subject by considering a monk in ancient India. "He has left his family behind; he is celibate; he doesn't eat after noon; he studies texts that give him a skeptical

view of the phenomenal world and its value. Is his practice really *exactly the same*," McMahan asks, "as that of a contemporary secular mindfulness practitioner who is meditating to excel at work or to be more compassionate to her children?"

If this question makes us a little uncomfortable, there is good reason, because it triggers an underlying tension. On the one hand, we want to counter McMahan's challenge: Don't we believe the Buddha's teachings are timeless? Suffering, after all, doesn't belong to a particular culture or historical age. Beings suffered in the past, and they are pretty clearly suffering now. There was a solution to suffering taught by the Buddha, and it is still available today. On the other hand, an ever-growing body of evidence tells us that over time and across cultures (and even within traditions) there exist multiple versions of Buddhism that all define the human problem and its solution differently. We might be left wondering: If Buddhism is changed by culture or history, how can it be authentic? How could it be true?

This tension isn't just a Buddhist problem, McMahan points out. It is a deep paradox in modern life.

The double whammy of rationalist thinking is that when we imagine truth is singular, cross-cultural, and ahistorical, we slam into the reality of historical change and cultural pluralism; when we accept that plural truth claims can be equally valid, we slam into relativism.

McMahan says, "The understanding that social science and contemporary philosophy and anthropology have brought to the importance of cultural context is a uniquely modern Western phenomenon." But he assures us that Buddhism's teachings on emptiness and dependent origination can shed important light on this seeming paradox. In June 2013, I sat down with him during a break at a Mind and Life conference in Garrison, New York, to ask him to place Buddhism beside the contemporary

Western intellectual tradition to explore why and how context matters.

—L.H.

Are you pushing against some popular misconception in your work on Buddhism and modernity? There is a prevalent misperception, especially among Western practitioners, that what they practice is basically the same thing Buddhists have practiced since the time of the Buddha. They seldom recognize how contemporary forms of Buddhism have been re-contextualized by Western tacit assumptions and understandings.

Can you tell me about your current research on the role of context in meditation? I'm trying to see how meditation works in a systemic way within a culture. I'm trying to get away from meditative "states," or thinking of meditation in a static sense: "You do practice A and it leads you to state X." The meaning, the significance, the understanding, and the rationale for meditation in one culture might be different than in another. For example, if somebody from a Tibetan tradition who has had very little contact with the West does a particular practice, is it really going to be exactly the same as when a modern Western professional does what is on paper "the same practice" but nested in very different contexts?

What exactly do you mean by "context?" First of all, there's the explicit context of the dharma. Right now, for the first time ever, we have contemplative practices derived from the Buddhist tradition that are being practiced completely independently of any Buddhist context. Secularization has filtered out what we would call "religious elements." It is those

religious elements, those ethical elements, and those intentions that have always formed the context of meditation and that have made meditation make sense. Otherwise, what sense does it make to sit down for half an hour and watch your breath? Somebody has to explain to you why that matters, why it is a good idea, and what it is actually doing in the larger scheme of things. When meditation comes to the West completely independently of that, it is like a dry sponge; it just soaks up the cultural values that are immediately available. So it becomes about self-esteem. Or it might be about body acceptance or lowering your stress. It might be about performing lots of different tasks efficiently at work. It might be about developing compassion for your family. A whole variety of new elements now are beginning to form a novel context for this practice, which has not only jumped the monastery walls but broken free from Buddhism altogether.

I know people who are not interested in being Buddhists or studying Buddhist philosophy who have really benefited from stripped-down mindfulness practice. So I'm not in a position to say, "Oh no, you shouldn't be doing this unless you can read Nagarjuna!" [*Laughs*.] Every culture has its elite religion and its more popular folk religion; it's almost like mindfulness is becoming a folk religion of the secular elite in Western culture. We'll see whether that's a good thing or a bad thing.

To expand the idea of context further, there is also cultural context, which obviously can be very different. And again, there are a lot of tacit understandings there: I feel myself in a world of atoms and molecules and bacteria and viruses and galaxies that are unimaginably far away. I think I'm literally incapable of feeling myself in a world in which there are cold hells and hot hells beneath my feet. So in that sense, just our ordinary being-in-the-world—our "life world," to use a phenomenological term—is deeply conditioned by these cultural elements. And this

cultural context provides novel goals and intentions to which meditation is put in service.

Does acknowledging the importance of context mean we have to be cultural relativists? I'm not a complete cultural relativist. I'm not saying everything is cultural. There are things that obviously go across cultures. We're all working with the same basic neurophysiology. But epistemologies and ways of seeing the world are deeply embedded in cultures. The basic categories we use to make sense of the world are culturally constructed. I think it's interesting that the Buddhist tradition has seen something of this—not so much in terms of culture, but in terms of language and concepts. For instance, Nagarjuna, in my reading, says that there's no set of categories that finally, simply, mirrors the world. All categories, ultimately, are empty of that self-authenticating representation of reality as it is. I think that insight is really an interesting one to take into the contemporary world, because now we can expand on that with this idea of culture.

You can see how that rubs up against the whole scientific enterprise. Even though good scientists are much more nuanced about it today than they would have been a hundred years ago, the ideal of the sciences is still "a view from nowhere." The purpose is to get us out of those contexts, to get us out of those very particularistic ways of seeing things. And that's going to create a tension between the humanities and social sciences on the one hand and the hard sciences on the other.

We want to have a kind of final understanding of the world. That's natural. We don't want to be told that the way we're seeing the world is just a product of our upbringing and our language and our culture. And yet there are certain things that can only be seen through the lenses of particular traditions or particular categories. So I think rather than see-

ing the existence of various systems of knowledge or taxonomies and so on as devaluing, you can see them as different lenses. That doesn't mean they're all the same and they're all equally valuable. Some may be much more valuable for certain purposes, and some may be valuable for other purposes.

What sorts of misunderstandings about meditation might practitioners fall into if they assume the context of meditation is unimportant? It can lead to dogmatism about progress in meditation along the path: here is this stage, here is the next stage. And we find these schemas in the Buddhist texts, so there is every reason for a good Buddhist to think those schemas of meditative progress are simply built into the nature of things—built into the mind itself. Why shouldn't we think that if we are going to be Buddhists and practice Buddhism? I'm not saying we shouldn't necessarily, but first of all, we are confronted with the plurality of maps of the path. This is the same general problem of pluralism that we are confronted with in the modern world. I don't even think it is unique to the modern world. One view would be to say that my map is simply the right one and everybody else is off. The other would be to say that there are lots of different maps, and that they do different things. If you look at actual maps of the earth, you realize that you can never really make a completely accurate map of the earth. Mapmakers struggle with this. Do you make it look curved? Do you represent roads? You just can't represent the earth on a flat piece of paper in an absolutely straightforward way. You have to make all kinds of choices. So where you are going and what you are doing really matters when you are trying to make a map. In the Theravada, the ultimate goal of meditation is to transcend the world completely. In the Mahayana, you want to come back as a bodhisattva over and over again. So these maps get configured differently.

Isn't the view that "no map is absolutely true" also a view? It is. In his *Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way*, Nagarjuna lays out his understanding of emptiness, and then he makes a surprising, even an astonishing, move. He says, "Ultimately, everything that I've said is also empty." This is the idea of the emptiness of emptiness. He is admitting that everything he is laying out is also a pragmatic map, not an absolute system that corresponds to reality in an absolute way. There is some discussion and debate about whether when Nagarjuna critiques views he is talking about any view or just wrong views. I kind of like the "any view" view [*laughs*]—that any kind of map or system that you hang onto and make into something that you believe corresponds to reality in and of itself becomes a kind of bondage.

Isn't part of the problem here the assumption that "corresponding to reality in and of itself" is what it means for a map, concept, or idea to be true? After all, we Buddhists don't buy that there *is* reality "in and of itself." Very true. That is why we have such a hard time as modern Westerners trying to see a way around this problem. It is so firmly built into the Western Enlightenment system of thinking, and into modernity, that we have sentences and representations in our minds that correspond (or don't correspond) to external reality. Descartes and Bacon set up this whole way of thinking. There have been a number of moves in more contemporary Western thought—phenomenology, for instance—to develop a language that gets away from this. But it is deeply rooted in our culture to think that way. And science encourages us to think that way.

Maybe this tension is running through other cultures too—the tension between a very detailed systematic view of how things are and a suspicion of our ability to construct a completely accurate model. In a

lot of Abhidharma literature, there seems to be an attempt to account for everything, to get a category for everything, to really make a comprehensive accounting of the phenomenological reality of being human. I think it was in reaction to that systematizing that Nagarjuna and the Perfection of Wisdom came along and said that language doesn't work that way—it doesn't simply correspond to self-existing, independent entities that match our categories. So this tension is there even in the Buddhist tradition historically.

I think there is an assumption among many Western Buddhists that decontextualization of the dharma is okay because if non-Buddhists just do these meditation practices—for whatever reason—then they will have Buddhist insights. So it becomes almost a covert way of converting people.

Yes. From what you're saying, it sounds like maybe it's not so cut and dried. It is a little more complicated than that, because to have those insights you need to have a bit of that context in place. Explicit teachings are a context that reprograms the mind deeply, at both a conscious and a tacit level. It is no accident that Buddhists memorize and recite scriptures, repeating them over and over and over. This makes the dharma sink very deeply into the mind, so that it forms the tacit background of understanding. And that is part of what bubbles up in insight. It's not just that insight clears away everything and then—boom!—there's bare insight into something. Reconditioning is a necessary precondition for at least some forms of insight.

Can you give me an example? Look at one of the earliest comprehensive meditation texts, the *Four Foundations of Mindfulness*. I'm always fascinated by the fact that people work with this fundamental text today,

because generally people just take one tiny slice of it—bare attention to breath and physical movements—and that becomes "mindfulness" in the modern world. But if you keep reading to the end of the sutra, you realize that there are all kinds of very conceptual aspects. And far from being simply "nonjudgmental," it suggests making wise and discerning ethical judgments and judgments on the value of various things. The sutra is training the mind to see the world and oneself in certain ways. Rather than have you see yourself as solid, singular, and permanent, it offers an alternative way to train to see yourself: five *skandhas*. It goes through the relationship between the senses and the external world. And then the sutra ends up with a meditation on the eightfold path and the four noble truths. You are meditating on a thumbnail sketch of the whole dharma! So there is a *lot* of conceptual stuff going on there. The text attempts to train the mind to see the world in a particular way that is conducive to following the Buddhist path and to making progress toward enlightenment. So the text supplies a whole raft of attitudes, orientations, ethics, and values that form the context—and sometimes the actual content—of the meditation practices. Bare awareness may be a starting place, a way of focusing and concentrating the mind. But this broader context supplies the rationales and aims of practice. Even in the most secularized contemporary mindfulness movements, there are lots of these values and attitudes that enter in because it doesn't really work without some kind of conceptual and ethical orientation.

Why do you think the importance of context is so hard to see here? I think that's fostered by a certain idea that meditation actually gets us beyond all context, that that's really what it's supposed to do. It's supposed to get us beyond this cultural stuff and make us transcend our culture. And I would say that this itself is an idea that's coming very much out of

a modern context. Modern Western notions of freedom are often about freedom of the autonomous individual from social, institutional, cultural influences and conditioning. The idea that many modern practitioners have that meditation is somehow beyond cultural or other forms of context stems largely from D. T. Suzuki's articulation of Zen, which really emphasizes the nonconceptual. It also comes out of the modern pluralistic context whereby, for the past couple of hundred years, we've been bumping into other cultures at an unprecedented rate, trying to figure out what to do with each other, recognizing each other's differences, and having wars about those differences. If we can get beyond concepts, then we are not bogged down in who is right and who is wrong and who has the right model of things. D. T. Suzuki says we can just cut through all that and get to a direct pure experience of reality in and of itself, beyond cultural context.

There is a place at a certain point for overcoming concepts and conditioning, but there is also a lot of reconceiving and reconditioning. The idea is to transform the mind, not just to extract it from all cultural influences. Buddhism itself is a culture—one that attempts to train and condition minds in specific ways conducive to awakening. In some traditions there is the idea that you do transcend all causes and conditions completely, but there is a way to go before that.

Is there something to be said about the Buddhist notion of dependent arising in relation to context? If phenomena are dependently originated as the teachings tell us they are, in a sense it is all context. Yes, exactly. The very notion of things arising from causes and conditions is an affirmation of the importance of contextuality. It's no accident that the concept of dependent arising or interdependence has become so prominent in understandings of Buddhism today. The world is so interconnected

today that everybody is talking about this.

In the earliest forms of Buddhism, the notion of dependent arising or interdependence was not really good news. It was a device to explain how suffering arises (as in the twelve links). It wasn't a celebration of our interconnectedness in a living web of creation. It was something you wanted to extract yourself from; it was bondage. With the arising of the Mahayana, especially in China, there was a shift in understanding the phenomenal world and its significance. Chinese Buddhists were able to look at nature as an expression of buddhanature—and there were debates about whether trees and grasses could be enlightened and whether they really were sentient. Also, there were a lot of nature metaphors for enlightenment. And so the Chinese appreciation of nature infuses itself into this idea of interdependence and provides a more world-affirming version of it, which then centuries later runs into the Transcendentalists and the Romantic view of nature and deep ecology. Now we have a whole new flourishing of the notion of interdependence that has been informed not only by these streams of Buddhism but also by various Western ideas of interdependence.

So there is a shift that happens over many centuries. There emerges the possibility of seeing the world both as a place of suffering and bondage and also as a place of liberation—a projection of the buddhas and bodhisattvas, like a training ground or a pure land, a place in which there is a sacred and wondrous hidden aspect in the ordinary things of the world. The *Avatamsaka Sutra* symbolizes this by wild visions of tiny universes in grains of sand or the pores of the Buddha's skin. The attitudes toward the world itself become more varied and complex. And then, when you get to the modern world, certain realities and concepts in the modern world serve like magnets that pull out particular ideas from the Buddhist tradition, leaving others behind. Interdependence

is one of these ideas that has really been pulled out. Not the old idea of the twelve-link chain of dependent origination. That idea resonates with people who really immerse themselves in the Buddhist worldview, but when I try to explain it to my students, they don't get it right away. But when they read a paragraph by Thich Nhat Hanh about interdependence—how the paper is dependent on the sunshine, and the cloud, and the lumber worker, and all that—they immediately understand it.

Conditions right now in the world are such that interdependence is a prominent and obvious fact. Everything is connected through communications technology and through ease of travel. We know that if we screw up the environment over here, it can affect things on the other side of the world. So suddenly the image of Indra's net attains new significance; in fact, it has become one of the most prominent images and concepts in modern articulations of Buddhism, while it had nowhere near that prominence in the past, except in a particular Chinese Buddhist school.

I do think that this pointing out of historical change and the relativity of cultural contexts can be very disturbing and destabilizing. It is not necessarily a comforting thought. But it is interesting that it is destabilizing in a way that Buddhism has been pointing out all along.

7

CULTURE WARS

As science invades the humanities, our understanding of Buddhism hangs in the balance.

In view of Western Buddhists' eagerness to collaborate with the scientific study of Buddhism, it might be a good idea to consider whether this collaboration is likely, in the long run, to affirm or prove injurious to the very values and understandings that make one a Buddhist in the first place. In so doing, we might cast an eye to academia, where interdisciplinary cross-fertilization between the humanities and the sciences is all the rage. With a brain-science model moving into traditionally non-scientific realms like aesthetics, ethics, and literature, how have the humanities fared?

If you are interested in finding out, I recommend following the swelling media tsunami set off by an essay published in *The New Republic* by Harvard psychologist Steven Pinker, "Science Is Not Your Enemy: An impassioned plea to neglected novelists, embattled professors, and tenure-less historians" (August 6, 2013). Pinker declares the present era—on the basis of its stunning scientific and technological advancements—to be "an extraordinary time for the understanding of the human condition." He thinks his colleagues in the humanities should share his delight and be "energized by the efflorescence of new ideas from the sciences." He observes that instead, "the intrusion of science into territories of the humanities has been deeply resented." Pinker ap-

peals to these colleagues to come to their senses, cross the fence, and submit to the scientific worldview.

The New Republic's literary editor, Leon Wieseltier, slammed back against what he calls Pinker's "scientism" with "Crimes Against Humanities: Now science wants to invade the liberal arts. Don't let it happen" (September 3, 2013). Tufts Professor of Philosophy Daniel Dennett responded to Wieseltier's piece, accusing Wieseltier of "name-calling and sarcasm," which, writes Dennett, "are typically the last refuge of somebody who can't think of anything else to say to fend off a challenge he doesn't understand and can't abide." The wave of highbrow mud-slinging even reached the *New York Times.* (See "The Scientism of Steven Pinker" and "Science's Humanities Gap.")

Pinker touts the increasing convergence of the humanities and the sciences as "an infusion of new ideas" into the humanities. But to Wieseltier, it is "not so much a convergence of the sciences with the humanities but a convergence of the sciences upon the humanities."

The key question to ask is: What is meant by knowledge?

The validity of science is not at issue. Pinker's colleagues in philosophy, literature, or history aren't calling for a rejection of germ theory or evolution. All the participants in this debate accept, honor, and appreciate the primacy of science as an extremely effective means of gaining objective knowledge about the physical world. At issue is the presumption that *this is the only kind of knowledge there is* and whether the scientific model should be considered the *only* valid model for understanding the human condition—in other words, scientism.

Wieseltier writes:

> Pinker seems to be saying that reason is essentially scientific. This is…one of his definitional tricks. Reason is larger than science.

> Reason is not scientific; science is rational. Moreover, science is not all that is rational. Philosophy and literature and history and critical scholarship also espouse skepticism, open debate, formal precision…and—at the highest reaches of humanistic labor—even empirical tests….Scientists and scientizers are not the only ones working toward truths and trying to get things right.

This battle between Pinker and Wieseltier is one front line of a civil war that is currently splitting Western intellectual life. The war involves a clash of academic disciplines, with scientists generally on one side, and on the other, humanists, literary critics, artists, and those in the social and behavioral sciences who take a qualitative, interpretive approach. Even more than a clash of disciplines, it is a confrontation of cultures. Scientific culture assumes we are human organisms (or, of late, that we are the human brain) living in an objective universe in which the questions worth asking are literal matters concerned with the explanation of physical processes and the discovery of natural laws and empirical facts. The method of investigating those questions is experimentation. And valid answers are singular; if two explanations contradict, only one can be right. Humanistic culture, on the other hand, assumes that we are human beings living in a world of meaning. The questions worth asking are interpretive ones concerned with qualitative value, morality, and purpose. There are many methods of investigating those questions—the appropriate form depends on the discipline, the context, and the particular question. And these sorts of questions have more than one right answer.

Buddhists might take note that there is a predictable result when a nonscientific culture converges with a scientific one; that is, science dominates. As science begins to take on questions that were previously

humanistic ones, the world of lived experience becomes the objective universe. The human being becomes the human body. Meaning, beauty, value, and ethics (not to mention the nature of consciousness) are reduced to matters of objective fact. This same fate awaits Buddhism.

Indeed, the Western Buddhist community is implicated in this war. If you browse the pages of Buddhist publications or visit the Eastern Thought section of your local bookstore, you'll see many articles and books advocating a scientific understanding of Buddhism. You might also begin to see others that criticize this approach, claiming—like the humanists—that knowledge in Buddhism is about understanding lived experience, not explaining physical processes. Any method of study that turns Buddhism into a simple set of technical operations is bound to mislead; to study Buddhism as a natural science is to remove it from the realm of meaning, to reduce it to something it is not, and to miss out on what about it really matters.

Does this new collaboration actually serve the cause of the advancement of knowledge? We need to ask whether translating nonscientific discourse into scientific discourse actually answers nonscientific questions or merely takes them off the table—rendering them invisible by sleight of hand. Wieseltier invites us to a scientific explanation of a painting:

> A breakdown of Chardin's cherries into the pigments that comprise them, and a chemical analysis of how their admixtures produce the subtle and plangent tonalities for which they are celebrated. Such an analysis will explain everything except what most needs explaining: the quality of beauty that is the reason for our contemplation of the painting.

Likewise, can scientific investigation of attention, emotion, compassion, or meditation really answer any important questions about our practice? Buddhism's collaboration with science risks taking off the table the things we really care about—like morality and spiritual purpose, including purposes such as liberation from suffering. Morality and purpose belong to the realm of human meaning. In conflating the investigation of human meaning with the investigation of the physical body, don't we, in gaining the brain, rather obviously stand to lose the mind? What then would be left of our "Buddhism"?

For this reason, Western practitioners might think twice about presenting Buddhism as a science of mind or as fully science-compatible. We should ask ourselves, is the kind of truth embodied in Buddhism actually *scientific*? Some aspects of Buddhism might well be compatible with science, but ethics, values, and purpose are simply not matters of scientific fact; they are matters of human meaning. Many of us are trying to pass off our spiritual endeavors as "scientific," because that is the only category of truth that prevailing attitudes of exclusivity recognize. Rather than aligning with scientism, we might be better served by standing with the humanists, literary critics, scientists, historians, and artists who are challenging it.

8

THE SCIENCE DELUSION

An interview with cultural critic Curtis White

MAY 2012

Curtis White pulls no punches. To readers who see in Buddhism little room for spirited debate, White's unapologetic bluntness may seem unexpected or even jarring. But for White—Distinguished Professor Emeritus of English at Illinois State University, novelist, and author of several works of criticism including the 2003 international bestseller *The Middle Mind: Why Americans Don't Think for Themselves*—there is too much at stake in our current intellectual climate to indulge in timid discussion.

White's book *The Science Delusion: Asking the Big Questions in a Culture of Easy Answers* (2013), strikes out at a nimble opponent, one frequently sighted yet so elusive it often seems to dodge just out of view: scientism. White identifies scientism as an unwarranted triumphalism based on unproven premises—such as the claim that science has got the world nailed down (or soon will, anyway), that the answer to all of our human problems lies in the discovery of natural laws, or that submitting to a scientific perspective is a choiceless imperative dictated by impersonal facts. To White, this attitude is not only wrongheaded, it is dangerous and wreaks social, cultural, and political damage.

The Science Delusion takes dual aim: at scientists and critics who proclaim themselves "enemies of religion" and at certain neuroscien-

tists and thought leaders in the popular press whose neuro-enthusiasm, White thinks, is adding spin to the facts. What these science advocates share, he says, is both an ideology promoting the scientific worldview as the single valid understanding of human phenomena and also a set of assumptions, "many of which," he writes, "are dubious if not outright deluded." But for White, the debate over knowledge claims is a side skirmish. There is a more urgent battle to fight that becomes evident when he asks, "In whose interest do these science popularizers and provocateurs write? And to what end?"

White writes at a moment when the arts and humanities are struggling for survival on campuses across America as they are increasingly eclipsed by the "STEM" disciplines (science, technology, engineering, and math). In White's view, what we are witnessing is a takeover, on the part of science, of the multiple narratives of what it means to be human—narratives that have flourished throughout Western history in religion, art, literature, and philosophy. Scientism comes with its own narrative, which White puts like this: "We are not 'free'; we are chemical expressions of our DNA and our neurons. We cannot will anything, because our brains do our acting for us. We are like computers or systems, and so is nature." When this is what we think we are, we become quiescent cogs readily manipulated by societal forces. In White's view, once scientism rewrites our story so that the things human beings care about—like love, wonder, presence, or play—are reduced to atoms, genes, or neurons, human lives become easy prey to corporate and political interests. We become "mere functions within systems." White wants us to wake up and recognize that this view is not scientific discovery; it is ideology. Mistaking one for the other has profound consequences, "not just for knowledge but even more importantly for how we live."

Western Buddhists, engaged as we are in adapting an Asian reli-

gious tradition, generally agree that it is valuable to try to understand how Buddhism has been shaped by its host cultures in Asia. But shining that light of understanding on ourselves is a much more difficult proposition. It is hard to see what presumptions we bring to the project precisely because they are our own and not someone else's. In striking hard at some of our most deeply ingrained assumptions, White brings them to our attention. Whether or not we agree with his critique isn't the point. White isn't looking for agreement. He wants to challenge our complacency, and in so doing, to shift the very framework within which we determine our agreements and disagreements.

—L.H.

Your book *The Science Delusion* is clearly a response to the title of Richard Dawkins's book *The God Delusion*. What is the science delusion, and what are its implications for living a spiritually meaningful life? There is no singular science delusion. One of the biggest challenges in writing a book that tries to question the role that science plays in our culture is being visible at all. So the title is a provocation, although an earnest one.

What I criticize is science as ideology, or scientism, for short. The problem with scientism is that it attempts to reduce every human matter to its own terms. So artistic creativity is merely a function of neurons and chemicals, religion is the result of the God gene, and faith is hardwired into our genetic makeup.

Not surprisingly, "spirit" is a forbidden word. Science writers tend to reduce believers to fundamentalists and the history of religion to a series of criminal anecdotes. Richard Dawkins is, and Christopher Hitchens was, particularly culpable in this regard. Any subtle consideration of the

meaning of spirit is left out. But of course the history of religious thought is quite subtle, as anyone familiar with Buddhist philosophy knows well. Another good example is the legacy of Christian existential thinkers beginning with Kierkegaard: it seems to me shamefully dishonest not to acknowledge such work.

Both scientism and religious fundamentalism answer the human need for certainty in a rapidly shifting and disorientingly pluralistic world. To what extent are they in the same business? As your question suggests, the drama of the confrontation between religious fundamentalism and scientism is a confrontation between things that are more alike than they know. Both fundamentalism and scientism try to limit and close down, not open up. Science tends to be vulnerable to the "closed-in" syndrome. Scientists value curiosity, and they value open-mindedness, but they are often insensible to alternative ways of thinking about the world. It's really difficult for them to get outside of their own worldview. This problem is probably created by the way in which we educate scientists. It seems to me that scientists need to have a better background in history and the history of ideas, especially if prominent figures like Stephen Hawking are going to pass judgment on that history and say things like "Philosophy is dead."

There is a common assumption that science is not a worldview but simply "the way things are." Along with that assumption goes another: that science derives its authority from its privileged access to how things are—that it launches off from the bedrock of the Real. The odd thing here is that science itself tells us that it does *not* have a privileged access to things as they are, and that the philosophical paradoxes in its discoveries, especially in physics, are an open acknowledgment of

its many uncertainties.

What we have now is this very uncomfortable joining of an ideological assumption that science is fact-based with the actual work of science, something that is highly speculative and whose reality is often only mathematical. For example, physics is deeply dependent on mathematical modeling, but no one knows why mathematics seems to be so revealing about reality. As the physicists Tony Rothman and George Sudarshan point out in *Doubt and Certainty*, the math equation of the Black-Scholes model used by stock traders is identical to the equation that shows how a particle moves through a liquid or gas. But, as they observe laconically, in the real world there is a difference between stocks and particle movement.

Even something as familiar as Newtonian equations are mathematical idealizations and, as Einstein showed, they are inadequate in important ways. And if Newtonian predictions about the movements of things as large as astral bodies are idealizations, what can be said about quanta or strings or the branes strings are said to attach to? These things are *only* numbers. They have no empirical presence at all.

Most Buddhists would have little argument with the statement in *The Science Delusion* that "the world is something we both find and invent." How is this understanding at odds with scientism? Even now, after Heisenberg, after quantum physics, so much of the discourse of science in its public proclamations is focused on the establishment of knowledge as fact. This overlooks the paradoxical nature of scientific confirmation. Does confirmation mean positive knowledge of reality? Does it mean probability? Does it mean that something is useful? Newton's equations have never stopped being useful, even though they have been superseded by general relativity.

Scientism is intolerant of the idea that the universe depends for its being on the participation of mind. Immanuel Kant's Copernican Revolution was about this single fact: we have no simple access to the *thing in itself*. Any knowledge we have of reality is necessarily mediated by our own symbolic structures, whether they be math, philosophy, religion, or art. Even the theoretical physicist John Archibald Wheeler could say with conviction, "The universe does not exist 'out there,' independent of us. We are inescapably involved in bringing about that which appears to be happening." Yet what we most often hear from scientism is "We scientists deal in knowledge of truth, and philosophers, artists, and religious believers don't." End of conversation.

Many assume that logic and reason lead away from religion. How can the systematic study of literature and art affirm religion? Our culture widely assumes that all reason is empirical reason: a logical development proceeding from an empirical fact. Similarly, we tend to assume that spirit concerns things that are supernatural. But this is not the only way to understand reason or spirit. The essence of the spiritual logic of Buddhism is contained in the four noble truths. There is suffering. Most of this suffering comes from self-interested desire enabled by delusion. This suffering can be stopped. The eightfold path shows how suffering can cease. This is not an appeal to the supernatural, but it is most certainly an appeal to spirit.

The ultimate religious question, the ultimate religious mystery, is not whether or not there is a God. I call myself an atheist because I think that question is silly, childish, and beside the point. The ultimate religious question is "What is compassion?" Or as Christianity puts it, "What is love?" Compassion is not a quality that can be demonstrated empirically. It is not a thing. It is something that we use flexibly. It speaks

to a quality that we keep very close to us: the *urgency* of kindness. Compassion exists only to the extent that we invest it with the energy of our own lives—"altruism gene" be damned.

This sort of "theo-logic" also exists in the West. If there is a God principle in existential Christianity, it is in its confidence in the ultimacy of compassion. The Protestant theologian Paul Tillich argued that God is the object of our "ultimate concern." When we are claimed by those concerns, we open ourselves to our true nature.

And art since Romanticism participates in a similar logic. Of course, the common assumption is that art is just imagination or entertainment or a waste of time. My point is that *art thinks*, and the history of art for the last two centuries shows that art thinks in very particular ways. Art has its own spiritual logic. It asks: How are we to transcend what Friedrich Schiller calls "the misery of culture," meaning industrial culture in which man is "nothing but a fragment"? For Schiller and the Romantics, the multifold path of art is the way to accomplish the transcendence of this suffering. As Pablo Picasso wrote, "Painting is not made to decorate apartments. It is a weapon of offensive and defensive war against the enemy." As Picasso's *Guernica* or Goya's *The Third of May 1808* show, the "enemy" is cruelty.

Now, in any of these contexts, this is a perverse logic. If you had to judge the situation empirically, I don't see how you could fail to conclude that the "preponderance of evidence," as lawyers like to say, points to the idea that, as O'Brien says in Orwell's *1984*, the future is "a boot stamping on a human face—forever." But Buddhism comes to the opposite conclusion. Our suffering is proof not of who we are—violent because of "human nature"—but of the fact that we are deluded, that we don't know ourselves, and that if we are to end suffering we must, as Nietzsche says, *become who we really are*. It is the perversity of this logic that makes

it spiritual because it is in no way supported by the facts on the ground. It's like the story of the Jew who tells his Christian neighbor that he is going to Rome to see what Christianity is really like. The neighbor, of course, fears that once the man sees all of the corruption there he will not convert. But when his neighbor returns, he says, "Ah, my friend, yours is truly the greatest faith, otherwise it could not survive such cruelty and hypocrisy."

The crucial thing to see in this process of thought is that it is a form of spiritual reason based in realism: our experience of how it is with the human world. True, it is not empirical reason driven by a notionally objective world, but neither are its conclusions dependent on supernaturalism or magical thinking. The idea that all human reason must be empirical is a story that is told to us by our masters.

When critics speak of scientism as an ideology, many seem to be thinking of an ideology as a set of beliefs—like propositions you hold in your head. Your book gave me a sense that ideology, in particular scientism, is much more deeply rooted than that. I use the word *ideology* in the sense that Marx used it: the stories and ideas that we live out as members of a particular culture. Needless to say, there is a neutral sense in which every culture must have ideologies. The pejorative sense of the term comes from the idea that structures of power and privilege can and do manipulate and enforce these stories in order to support their own interests. The stories stop being concerned with the question "what is the best way for us to live together?" and start being about "what stories best support our own interests?" Telling stories that you want everyone to see themselves in, but that really favor only one group, requires dishonesty. So what I am concerned with is identifying those dishonest or false elements within the ideology delivered to us by science and its patrons.

Of course, the primary ideological story told by science is that it has no relation to ideology. But that's what every ideology says. It says, "We are only concerned with the way things really are." And so the science of economics tells us that self-interest is rational, that it is the essence of freedom, and that it may even be a part of our genetic makeup. These become the covering fictions for stupendous destruction and cruelty. As Buddhism argues, these ideas are not skillful. They are delusions, and they do great harm.

Neuroscience's claim to be able to understand meditation in terms of the mechanics of neurons and chemicals is another example of ideological storytelling. You can have Buddhism, this story goes, as long as you are willing to acknowledge that it can be best understood through neuroscience. Buddhism is dangerous if it can't be made to confirm our culture's empiricist assumptions. If Buddhism refuses to confirm those assumptions, it is a counterculture and therefore a threat to the stability of the status quo. My feeling is that if we in the West are fated to misperceive Asian Buddhism, let it be a creative misperception in the spirit of Buddhism and not merely the repetition of a familiar and oppressive ideology.

You've written that we don't only have technology, we also have technocracy—which is run by corporatists, militarists, and self-serving politicians. You see a moral urgency to this situation, where many, including many Buddhists, are much more sanguine. It is a mistake to think that we just happen to have these toys and gadgets around without trying to understand what their relationship is to the larger culture. One of the first books that spoke to me powerfully as political theory was Theodore Roszak's *The Making of a Counter Culture* (1968). I reread it recently, and it still holds up very well. He wrote, "By technocracy, I mean that social form in which an industrial society reaches the peak of

its organizational integration." Theodor Adorno called it "administered society." An administered society is one in which technological rationality and industrial organization have penetrated deeply into every aspect of how we live.

For example, by bringing personal computers into our homes, we also brought our workstations into our homes. And so, who knows how many hours a week you work? In a sense, many workers are never not at work, because now they carry their job in their pocket. Or consider service workers in the fast food industry. These workers are treated not as humans but as a part of a superefficient machine, and the skills required of them are crudely mechanical as well.

The more normalized all of this becomes, the more oppressive—and, needless to say, perversely successful—it is. The result is a culture that is "totalized." Every aspect of the culture is made conformable to a certain technocratic and mechanistic ideal. That's why I say that scientism is such an important part of state ideology. It is doing work for the boss.

How? Simply by normalizing the idea that everything is a machine, especially us. We are not likely to make a Thoreauvian or a Buddhist critique of technocracy if we have been convinced that we are computers. Thoreauvian critiques are disruptive and disobedient, and technocracy would prefer that we not think in that way. Ultimately, we are arguing about what it means to be human.

For the moment, the idea that we are neural computers is in ascendancy. Currently, from a very early age our children are given to understand that if they want a decent standard of living, they're going to have to make their peace (ideally, an enthusiastic peace) with Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math, or STEM. Universities are now in

the business of training people to go out into a world that is understood to be one vast mechanism, and this includes nature or, as we now say, "the ecosystem." But that's OK because we're computers too. I can't emphasize enough how oppressive this feels to many young people. As one reviewer of my book wrote, rather bitterly, "Anyone who doesn't want to be a graphic designer, or a techie, or a slavish Apple devotee—no jobs for you!" And, I'll add, no way to pay off your huge student loans.

Anyone who doubts the seriousness of this vision should read David Brooks's December 2013 column for the *New York Times*, "Thinking for the Future," in which he predicts that the economy of the future will depend upon "mechanized intelligence." Fifteen percent of the working population will make up a mandarin class of computer geeks and the "bottom 85 percent" will serve them as "greeters" or by doing things like running food trucks. And yet, Brooks claims, this vast class of servants will have "rich lives" that will be provided for them by the "free bounty of the Internet."

In your own Thoreauvian article "The Spirit of Disobedience: An Invitation to Resistance," you quoted Simone Weil: "The authentic and pure values—truth, beauty, and goodness—in the activity of a human being are the result of one and the same act, a certain application of the full attention to the object." In light of this perspective, what are your thoughts about the introduction of meditation into education and industry, especially into the "creative industries" of Silicon Valley? Thoreau and Weil were writers coming out of the Romantic tradition. For me, the Romantic movement was an attempt to create a wisdom literature for the West. A good part of that wisdom had to do with returning us to the immediacy of the world. As a poetic technique this has come to be known as "defamiliarization." What it attempts to

do is to destroy the world of custom, habit, stereotype, and ideology so that we can see things for what they are, so that we can see and feel the "stone's stoniness." When Walt Whitman says that his poetry is about "leaves of grass," he is essentially saying, *We have not been attentive. We need to look again at this leaf of grass*. He wrote, "Bring all the art and science of the world, and baffle and humble it with one spear of grass."

Perhaps the saddest thing we can say about our culture is that it is a culture of distraction. "Attention deficit" is a cultural disorder, a debasement of spirit, before it is an ailment in children to be treated with Ritalin.

As for Silicon Valley, it has a legitimate interest in the health of its workers, but it has little interest in Weil's notion of "the authentic and pure values." Its primary aim is to bring Buddhist meditation techniques (as neuroscience understands them) to the aid of corporate culture, such as in the Search Inside Yourself program developed at Google. This is from the Search Inside Yourself Leadership Institute website:

> Developed at Google and based on the latest in neuroscience research, our programs offer attention and mindfulness training that build the core emotional intelligence skills needed for peak performance and effective leadership. We help professionals at all levels adapt, management teams evolve, and leaders optimize their impact and influence.

Mindfulness is enabling corporations to "optimize impact"? In this view of things, mindfulness can be extracted from a context of Buddhist meanings, values, and purposes. Meditation and mindfulness are not part of a whole way of life but only a spiritual technology, a mental app that is the same regardless of how it is used and what it is used for. It is

as if we were trying to create a Buddhism based on the careful maintenance of a delusion, a science delusion. It reminds me of the Babylonian captivity in the Hebrew Bible, but now the question for Buddhists is whether or not we can exist in technological exile and still remain a "faithful remnant."

Bringing Buddhist meditation techniques into industry accomplishes two things for industry. It does actually give companies like Google something useful for an employee's well-being, but it also neutralizes a potentially disruptive adversary. Buddhism has its own orienting perspectives, attitudes, and values, as does American corporate culture. And not only are they very different from each other, they are also often fundamentally opposed to each other.

A benign way to think about this is that once people experience the benefits of mindfulness they will become interested in the dharma and develop a truer appreciation for Buddhism—and that would be fine. But the problem is that neither Buddhists nor employees are in control of how this will play out. Industry is in control. This is how ideology works. It takes something that has the capacity to be oppositional, like Buddhism, and it redefines it. And somewhere down the line, we forget that it ever had its own meaning.

It's not that any one active ideology accomplishes all that needs to be done; rather, it is the constant repetition of certain themes and ideas that tend to construct a kind of "nature." Ideology functions by saying "this is nature"—this is the way things are; this is the way the world is. So, Obama talks about STEM, scientists talk about the human computer, universities talk about "workforce preparation," and industry talks about the benefits of the neuroscience of meditation, but it all becomes something that feels like a consistent world, and after a while we lose the ability to look at it skeptically. At that point we no longer bother to ask

to be treated humanly. At that point we accept our fate as mere functions. Ideology's job is to make people believe that their prison is a pleasure dome.

9

EASTERN SELF/ WESTERN SELF

MAY 2013

We in the West are quite concerned these days with how to make the dharma authentically Western. But caution please, folks. Before we start inventing a new flavor of Buddhism to suit Western palettes, it is important to look closely at the implicit assumptions we are bringing to this project.

To start, we might examine more closely our underlying picture about the nature of cultural difference. It looks something like this: Westerners tend to think of Asians as people basically like us who just have different customs—they hold different beliefs and have different ways of doing things. We tend to assume that Asians experience self-identity in the same way we do—that they are the same equation, if you will, just with different values for the variables. But what if in fact Asians aren't basically like us at all? What if the structure of the self—or call it the ego or the personality—is essentially different across cultures? Wouldn't this give us pause?

And if we are fundamentally different in this sense, how could we even know?

One way would be to take into account firsthand reports from people who straddle both worlds. So I was intrigued to come across Wesley Yang's review of novelist Gish Jen's book *Tiger Writing: Art, Culture, and*

the Interdependent Self (*New York Times*, Apr. 26, 2013), which explores narrative style differences between Asian and Western literary traditions. She traces the source of these differences to deeper differences in the fundamental structures of Asian and Western self-identity.

Jen is a second generation Chinese-American who speaks from her experiences navigating two distinct kinds of selves—an Asian identity shaped at home by her immigrant parents and a Western identity acquired outside the home growing up in Scarsdale, New York. At home, she learned an outward-looking sense of self, one acutely aware of her role in society, her duties, her obligations—she calls it "interdependent." But outside the home, the self-identity she was encouraged to develop was inward-looking and "independent." Her task as an American youth was to discover what it was she really wanted and to articulate what made her unique. As it turns out, those were two truly different projects.

Because she is a novelist, Jen is particularly attuned to the ways that the structure, meaning, and purpose of narrative show up differently against the backdrop of the two kinds of selves. As reviewer Yang reports, Jen was struck when she read her father's memoir:

> The account…offered few details of his own grandfather's "appearance or personality or tastes—the sorts of things we in the West might include as a way of conveying both his uniqueness and his importance as a figure in the narrative." It instead described at great length the number of doors in the house where her father grew up and whether they were open or shut—concentrating not on his individual self, but on the context within which that self was situated, and by which it was constrained. The world he describes is not, as Jen puts it, "a modern, linear world of conflict and rising action, but rather one of harmony and eternal,

cyclical action, in which order, ritual and peace are beauty, and events spell, not excitement or progress, but disruption."

…Jen's father had been born into a culture whose parenting style explicitly intends the humbling of the individual self in favor of the needs of the broader collective. (Parents engage in short, selective conversation with their children, emphasizing "proper behavior, self-restraint and attunement to others.") What this "low elaborative" parenting style aims at instead is the creation of an "interdependent self," defined not by its sense of inner autonomy, but by its sensitivity to the social roles it must play depending on the context in which it finds itself.

The scholars of cross-cultural cognition, who reject the universality of Western models of the mind, maintain that this emphasis on social context translates into a measurable divergence in how Easterners and Westerners literally see the physical world. Jen cites an experiment in which a group of old Singaporean men were shown images of a changing figure on an unchanging background. The men were so fixated on the background at the expense of the figure that fMRI readings failed to register any change in perception when the figure changed from a bucket to a guitar to a vacuum cleaner to a house plant.

Decontextualizing and isolating are Western values; they are axiomatic in scientific practice and foundational in Western individualism. As such, they shape our mode of being and our self-identity. Indeed—in just the manner of the Singaporean men in the fMRI experiment—these values translate into how we literally see the physical world. As a consequence, when we turn to our task of making the dharma authentically our own, we are perhaps too quick to pull it out of its Asian context.

We have been largely insensitive to how intimately interwoven the dharma is with the kind of Asian psychic space in which it developed. Andrew Cooper discussed this point with American Buddhist teacher Lewis Richmond in "The Authentic Life" in the Summer 2010 issue of *Tricycle*:

> **Cooper: There is a subfield of anthropology, often called psychological anthropology, that examines the specific ways the ego, the personality, the sense of being a subject, are constructed in different cultural settings. When one reads some of the literature, what is fascinating is seeing the degree to which the very sense of subjectivity is culturally formed. It could be a long time before we grasp the implications of this for translating Buddhism across cultures.**
>
> Richmond: I think it may well be that many practices developed in Asia might not be psychologically beneficial for Westerners for just that reason. When I left Zen Center, I felt like I had a bad case of spiritual indigestion, as though I had taken in something that I couldn't fully break down. This idea of the ego structure being significantly conditioned by culture probably has a lot to do with this. It might also speak to a common experience among many longtime practitioners I know, including myself: the discrepancy between what the tradition says should happen as a result of practice and the reality of what actually happens.

If, as Jen maintains, narratives read so differently against the backdrop of Asian and Western minds, so too could meditation practices read differently. The way Westerners interpret meditation in terms of inner experiences and psychology, for instance, might be simply the re-

sult of how we as Westerners are constructed—as interior-oriented and individualistic. But maybe what we need from Buddhism is not simply those elements that confirm the interior self but those that go against the grain of how we view the world.

Ironically, the very Buddhist teachings we are so concerned with transmitting to the West emphasize interdependence as the true nature of things. Seeing ourselves or the objects of our world as isolated or independent is considered ignorance according to the very teachings we are busily removing from their context and liberally putting into the service of Western individualism. I suggest we all take a deep breath, pause, and then go read Gish Jen's book.

10

EASTERN SELF/WESTERN SELF REVISITED

MAY 2013

My previous blog post, reflecting on Gish Jen's book, *Tiger Writing: Art, Culture, and the Independent Self*, generated quite a bit of discussion. Some respondents dismissed as mere "personal observation" the claim that people from Western and Eastern cultures tend toward different types of self-construal. Others considered such generalizations as an Eastern "collectivist self" vs. a Western "individualist self" stereotypical, unhelpful, or completely irrelevant. One reader, while acknowledging that cultural differences of self-construal were "well known and not new," stated flatly that such differences are "not important as far as awakening is concerned," while another worried that they were so important the dharma transmission to the West must be doomed—since the dharma is so deeply rooted in Asian contexts, how could it possibly exist elsewhere?

So I wanted to address these concerns.

First I want to set facts straight. It is well accepted among many scholars across academic fields that self-identity is construed differently across cultures and over time. While Gish Jen speaks for the most part from her own experience, she also cites several empirical studies by cross-cultural psychologists. The points she makes about differences

between Western "individualism" and Asian "collectivism" are also affirmed by a large body of anthropological and historical research. Western Buddhists are largely unaware of this scholarship, and we have yet to explore its implications for the transmission of the dharma to the West.

For those interested in reading some of the research on this topic, a good starting place is the anthology *Culture and Self*, edited by Anthony J. Marella, George Devos, and Francis L.K. Hsu, which includes essays by a range of anthropologists who explore how subjectivity is constituted in various cultural contexts. For insight into how the Western self-construal has changed over time, read Charles Taylor's *Sources of the Self—The Making of the Modern Identity*. For more on why these types of differences matter to Western Buddhists, see my *Tricycle* article "What's at Stake as the Dharma Goes Modern?" from the Fall 2012 issue.

Second, there is an important difference between acknowledging valid cultural differences and stereotyping. Acknowledgments of cultural difference admittedly are too often appropriated by prejudice, but they need not be. Gish Jen put this point quite well:

> Before I begin, I'd like to say that with this, as with all discussions involving cultural difference, I am aware of the danger of stereotyping. "Simplistic and overexaggerated beliefs about a group, generally acquired second-hand and resistant to change," as sociologist Martin M. Marger put it, are obviously to be roundly condemned and absolutely avoided. I am also aware, though, that fear of stereotyping has sometimes led to a discomfort with any assertion of cultural difference, no matter how thoroughly accepted by psychologists or how firmly grounded in research.
>
> To be unaware of (or outright deny) what is factually true is a kind

of blindness. Perhaps in the case of the blog post respondents the blindness is well-meaning—a kind of "don't-want-to-go-there" resistance to walking down a road known to be perilously vulnerable to sabotage by prejudice, power, and hatred. But when we don't pay conscious attention to differences, we tend to see others through our own filters, construct them in our image, and believe—falsely—that we see them accurately.

Gish Jen again:

> In his 1932 classic, *Remembering*, psychologist Frederic C. Bartlett describes an experiment in which British test subjects were asked to repeatedly retell a Native American ghost tale after intervals that ranged from a matter of minutes to a matter of months. The results were revealing: with each new round, the subjects misremembered yet more, unconsciously editing and reshaping the tale—changing seal hunting to "fishing," for example, and removing and altering what seemed to them weird story elements—until it had become something no longer Native American at all—until it had become, in fact, pretty bloody British.

You might think that's just what does and should happen. The dharma as seal-hunting-in-Alaska comes to the West as fishing-on-the-Thames. But what if there are important elements of seal hunting that gave that ghost tale its meaning—such as the danger involved, the taking of risk, or the need for courage—that are utterly left out of a fishing picnic on the river? Would that be "translating" the dharma, or would that be "reimagining" it?

The reader who wrote that differences in self construal between Asians and Westerners "are not important as far as awakening is concerned" was in one particular sense correct: the dharma teaches that

what ultimately binds us in samsara is clinging to any self as truly existent—hungry ghost, animal, human-interdependent, human-independent—the type of self isn't the problem, our clinging to it is. From this perspective, there is nothing exceptional about Westerners vis-à-vis Asians; we're equally bound, and we can equally become free. But these differences are critically important to our awakening in quite another sense.

Although all societies construct delusions in deep and hidden and stubborn ways, cultures have specific delusions that are particularly recalcitrant. The dharma in this sense is not one-size-fits-all. It must be interpreted and applied to its specific context. The real potential trouble spots in translating dharma teachings and practices to the West occur at those cross points where our culture is not only different from Asian culture, but different in an exactly-upside-down-and-backwards sort of way. Consider the following from the well-known sociologist of religion Robert Bellah. (For his complete interview with *Tricycle*'s Andrew Cooper, see "The Future of Religion" in the magazine's Fall 2004 issue.)

> Zen Buddhism began in Japan at a time when strong social structures hemmed in individuals on every side. The family you were born to determined most of your life-chances. Buddhism was a way to step outside these constricting structures. Becoming a monk was called *shukke*, literally, "leaving the family." We live in an almost completely opposite kind of society, where all institutions are weak and the family is in shambles. You don't need Buddhism to "leave the family." To emphasize primarily the individualistic side of Buddhism (especially Zen) in America is only to contribute to our pathology, not ameliorate it.

Liberation requires going against the grain of our pattern of clinging, no matter what that pattern is. If our self-construct is highly individualistic, then against the grain would be toward interdependence and mutual support; if the sense is highly enmeshed in social roles, then against the grain would be toward autonomy. But if the prevailing construct is individualistic and the teachings we employ focus on autonomy, then they don't push against the grain at all; they in fact reinforce the very problem Buddhism seeks to help us find a way out of.

Westerners can and need to make the dharma authentically our own. That is precisely the point of looking closely at cultural difference—to understand what the teachings mean in the culture we are taking them from so that we can translate that meaning accurately into a different context. The better we understand what differences are at play, the more skill we will have in navigating them. But if we simply adopt Buddhist teachings and practices without paying attention to the cultural contexts that have framed them for millennia, we risk understanding those teachings in a manner diametrically opposed to their intent. Our meditation might then reinforce the scaffolding of our suffering rather than destroy it. In what sense could we then consider our practice Buddhist?

11

UNDER ONE UMBRELLA

Can both tradition and science fit?
An interview with Thupten Jinpa Langri

MAY 2014

It is likely that few English-speaking admirers of the Dalai Lama recognize Thupten Jinpa Langri's face, even though they may well attribute to him an almost revered status. We who attend the Dalai Lama's public appearances know Jinpa, His Holiness's translator and interpreter, mainly by his voice. His job is to be an invisible conduit, and he keeps a low profile. So it was an unusual event—and the first time I had heard him address his own thoughts to an audience—when he took center stage at the Kalachakra Initiation in Washington, DC, in 2011 to deliver a talk entitled "Under the Umbrella of Buddhism: Do Religion, Science, and Secularism All Fit?" Jinpa began apologetically. When he prepared his talk, he had understood he would be addressing an audience of people from Himalayan regions, like Tibetans and Mongolians. Instead, several hundred Westerners showed up. Slightly flummoxed, he explained that the encounter between Buddhism and modernity plays out very differently for Buddhists from traditionally Buddhist cultures than for Western Buddhists. He would have to speak off the cuff.

Jinpa's dilemma struck me. When Western Buddhists think of the dialogue between Buddhism and science, we might picture meditators

in a laboratory wired to a brain scanner, researchers compiling responses to questionnaires, and other such exercises in data generation and gathering. If the mainstream press and the Buddhist press are any indication, we generally have little understanding of, and maybe even littler interest in, what the encounter with science might mean to traditional Buddhists such as Tibetans, who are struggling for cultural survival in an increasingly globalized world. When I thought about it, it was obvious that traditional Buddhists' encounter with modernity would be very different from modern Westerners' encounter with Buddhism. But how was it different? And more specifically and personally, I wondered if this difference could shed light on the Dalai Lama's seemingly genuine enthusiasm for science, which had long puzzled me.

Few are as well qualified as Jinpa to illuminate these questions. An adjunct professor of religious studies at McGill University, Jinpa is a rare scholar who holds degrees from top academic institutions East and West, religious and secular. He grew up as a monk at a monastery in south India and was educated in the classical Tibetan tradition, receiving the highest academic degree of Geshe Llaram from Ganden monastery. He then earned a BA Honors in philosophy and a PhD in religious studies from the University of Cambridge, UK. Jinpa has translated Tibetan poems (*Songs of Spiritual Experience*), written a book about Middle Way philosophy (*Self, Reality, and Reason in Tibetan Philosophy*), and edited more than a dozen of the Dalai Lama's books, including *The Universe in a Single Atom: The Convergence of Science and Spirituality*. Jinpa directs the Institute of Tibetan Classics, which he founded, and translates texts for the Institute's Library of Tibetan Classics. In recent years, he has collaborated with scientists at Stanford Medical School to pioneer research into positive mental traits, and he developed a secularized compassion training course that is now being pilot tested for treatment of PTSD in

veterans. Today he is the Chairman of the Board of the Mind and Life Institute, which for over 30 years has brought the Dalai Lama together with leading scientists to explore the nature of consciousness.

—L.H.

The Dalai Lama has been widely quoted in the popular press as saying: "If scientific analysis were conclusively to demonstrate certain claims in Buddhism to be false, then we must accept the findings of science and abandon those claims." How are we to understand this statement? His Holiness understands that Buddhist thought has some aspects that involve empirical claims. These aspects are the ones that thoroughly engage with science. These empirical claims may or may not stand up to current scientific understanding. And if they don't, in the light of new scientific findings, they are amenable to being changed. But there are other dimensions of Buddhist thought, such as its philosophical and ethical dimensions. His Holiness has a conception of science that does not claim the totality of reality.

It really depends on your conception of the scope of science. If you believe that anything that is knowable, anything that is real, has to somehow come under the scope of science, then of course you have conflict. But if your understanding of science is that science is a particular way of doing things—a particular way of knowing that includes a particular methodology—then some aspects of reality may fall into this category and some aspects may not.

For example, right and wrong, good and bad have no scientific status. Science cannot tell us what is right and what is wrong. You cannot derive moral statements from statements that have to do with fact. And this has been acknowledged in the West since David Hume's time.

Hume famously stated: "No ought from is." And in a sense His Holiness is agreeing. Science is in the business of trying to understand the facts. But how we use the facts is a different category of question.

What if science came up with evidence that contradicted fundamental tenets of Buddhism, such as impermanence or rebirth? But what would the evidence look like?

This reminds me of a question someone asked the Dalai Lama at his 2013 teachings in New York: "As science reveals more about our minds and the nature of life, what discoveries could be made to support the enlightened state?" In his reply, the Dalai Lama said, "It is important to make a distinction between what science has not found and what science has found not to be the case." This is an important methodological distinction drawn from Middle Way philosophy. Just because science hasn't found something to be the case doesn't mean science has disproven it; no proof is not evidence of disproof.

But if people in Buddhist traditions begin to feel that they somehow need scientific evidence to prove the efficacy and the validity of their practices, we're in trouble. Why would you need science to prove that what you are doing is valuable? I don't understand it.

But many Westerners do need it. [*Laughs.*] But then, in some sense you are distrusting the whole history of the tradition, as if none of that counts! For practicing Buddhists, why would you need third-person proof to show that your own practice is helping you? In the end, when it comes to spiritual practice, you are your own best proof. Individual practitioners can understand from their own personal experience that practice is helping them to be more understanding, to be more open, to be more at home with others, or to have a greater sense of ease. From my

point of view, these effects are much more powerful as a source of motivation than a scientific study that uses a scanner to show that when you meditate, things happen in your brain. Why would that help you?

One area where scientific study and evidence for the benefits of meditation practices does have a place is when secular adaptations of these practices are developed for the benefit of larger society in the context of clinical applications. For example, mindfulness-based behavior therapy is starting to be used as very effective treatment for relaxing tension. And increasingly, compassion meditation can be used for people with excessive negative self-judgment. In these kinds of situations, then having scientific evidence to show efficacy is helpful because these meditation techniques are in some sense non-pharmacological therapeutic treatments, which need some criteria to judge whether they are suitable for certain types of people.

In any case, at this point scientific study of meditation and its effects is very rudimentary. It is at such an early stage that there is no way it can show the specific effects of specific types of practice.

Do you see any problem with secularizing meditation? I don't have any moral qualms about this if it benefits people—so long as it's not claimed to be Buddhism. This is where I have a problem. If Buddhism is reduced to just meditation, and if meditation is reduced to just mindfulness, then there is a problem. Taking some things out of Buddhist practice and standardizing them for the benefit of the larger secular world, I have no problem with that. But what happens is that sometimes in the process, people then want to make the bigger claim that they have extracted the juice out of the Buddhist practices and what they have got is the essence, and what is left is all these mumbo-jumbo rituals that are useless. And this is where the problem is.

You have said that the tension between Buddhism and modernity is experienced differently by Buddhists from traditionally Buddhist cultures, such as Tibetans, and by Western Buddhists. What's different? The inherited intellectual traditions that are the starting points from which a Western Buddhist and a traditional Buddhist encounter modernity are very different. Traditional Buddhists have our basic worldview grounded in the Buddhist worldview. Then we engage critically with the dominant perspective and incorporate from it those elements that have much higher empirical support—at least with relation to the physical world—which need to be part of our own view. Traditionally this is how Buddhists have done it throughout history. That trend should continue for the Buddhist tradition to survive. But the basic grounding of one's worldview really has to be Buddhist.

Whereas Western Buddhists, or rather, Western convert Buddhists, came to Buddhism of their own initiative, so there are reasons why they chose Buddhism. Their reasons have nothing to do with a sense of loyalty to a particular memory or a mythology that is part of the narrative of the tradition. Many of them encounter Buddhism as part of a personal quest; generally it is a very individualistic approach. They come from an educated background, so their inherited intellectual tradition is the dominant one of science. Then they try to adapt elements of Buddhism that fit without too much conflict within that worldview. And so they are going to be more piecemeal in their embracing of the tradition.

How do traditional Buddhists and Western Buddhists differ in their relationship to science? How you incorporate scientific elements into your belief system really depends, again, on your conception of science and its scope. If you believe that everything that is knowable and everything that is true falls within the scope of science, then obviously you're

going to have a much more logical-positivistic sort of attitude. But if you have an understanding of the scope of science as more limited, then not everything you would recognize as part of reality falls within that category.

So science becomes part of a system for making sense of your experience rather than the entire system. Exactly. For traditional Buddhists it is better to have this more limited-scope conception of science, rather than the naive perception, which a lot of the general public has, that somehow science is the only avenue for understanding the real and if science doesn't say it, then it's not really real. This is a popular perception, and there's a danger that traditional Buddhists might also buy into it. And if they do, then many aspects of the tradition become problematic.

I am concerned for younger members of traditional Buddhist communities, because as they become interested in their heritage—and given that their command of their own mother tongue is not highly developed—they end up reading books written by contemporary Western Buddhist writers. I often remind them that they have to be careful not to confuse the portrait of Buddhism that they will see in these popular writings with traditional Buddhists' view of the tradition; for example, many contemporary Western Buddhists have little place for devotion in their practice. What can happen is that young people read these popular books and they start reinterpreting. Then there's a loopback effect that makes them feel alienated from their own traditional-Buddhist way of doing things.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama has long promoted introducing science training into classical Tibetan Buddhist monastic education. Why? His Holiness is concerned about bringing classical Tibetan cul-

ture and intellectual tradition into engagement with modernity. In the Tibetan exile community in India the majority of students go through a secular school system modeled on the Indian school system, which is basically a continuation of the British system. So they receive science education. But in the classical monastic training, generally speaking, there is no science training. Originally His Holiness had hoped that as the general population of Tibetans became educated in science, they would take charge of initiating a critical engagement with science; for example, they would begin writing scientific material in Tibetan and developing Tibetan language to be able to convey scientific ideas. That has not happened, because the general lay school system is a secular system, and science is generally taught in English. So no matter how scientifically educated Tibetan students may be at the end of their school or even university careers, they cannot be conversant in science in Tibetan to the point where they can engage the perspectives in classical Tibetan thought. That's why His Holiness began to feel that in order to bring the classical Tibetan tradition into engagement with modernity, science has to be brought into the monastic education itself.

Why was it not sufficient for Tibetans to be conversant in the ideas of science in English? These lay Tibetan students who have been getting trained in science have very rudimentary mastery of the classical Buddhist tradition. They are not able to engage with science from the standpoint of the Buddhist worldview. There's a whole new level of critical engagement with science that needs to happen, but that can only happen if it is the monastics who are scientifically informed.

So what you are talking about is a critical engagement of Tibetan Buddhism with science, not just Tibetan people with science. It is not Ti-

betan people per se but it is the Buddhist worldview. Buddhist concepts are really the content of the philosophical worldview of Tibetan people. And so in a sense, the essence of the Tibetan high culture or intellectual tradition is really Buddhist. Therefore, unless we find a way in which Buddhist ideas can critically engage with science in the Tibetan language, this encounter with modernity is never going to be done well.

One of His Holiness's main arguments for teaching science to monks is that if you look at the history of the development of Buddhist ideas, Buddhism has always engaged with whatever perspectives were current. For example, the development of Buddhist epistemology theory or Buddhist logical methods occurred in the context of a very deep and prolonged critical engagement with non-Buddhist traditions in India. Also His Holiness has argued that in Abhidharma texts there are quite a lot of discussions about the external world that are essentially scientific theories. So Buddhists have been interested in understanding the world, not just in personal development. In fact, on the Buddhist model, personal development presupposes having a correct understanding of the nature of reality. After all, it's the wisdom and knowledge that are supposed to liberate.

So His Holiness is reminding the monastic institutions that as a tradition Buddhism has always done this in the past. And now, unless Buddhism engages critically with science it will not be able to keep its own worldview up to date—particularly when it comes to physical theories of the world.

With the Dalai Lama's recent visit to Emory University, the Emory Tibet Science Initiative has caught the attention of the popular press. What is this initiative, and why is it important? The Emory Science Initiative is aimed at bringing science into the monastic education sys-

tem. There have been a couple of other initiatives before—such as Science Meets Dharma and Science for Monks—but what makes the Emory approach impressive is that they are developing a curriculum specifically for monastics. We cannot just teach science to monks as you would teach to a typical undergraduate or high school class—the context is completely different.

What are the challenges specific to that situation? You cannot just simply present discoveries as facts; you need to bring out their philosophical implications. A "big ideas" kind of approach is important. The monasteries have no illusion of developing into research centers to produce scientists. What they need is a program robust enough to convey the most important ideas and discoveries of science, to draw out their philosophical implications, and to raise challenges to some of the presuppositions behind their interpretations. So the monks are not just learning science. They're learning science as a thought system or a philosophical view. But one of the things about science, unlike philosophy, is that you cannot avoid some degree of factual learning. You need some building blocks.

Has there been resistance to His Holiness's idea of introducing science into the monasteries? Initially there was a lot of reluctance. It is perfectly understandable, because these monastic institutions are academic centers of learning that have several hundred years of history, success, and reputation. Most long-lasting institutions are conservative at their core. For example, look at the Catholic Church, or the monarchy system. Their conservatism is what makes these institutions endure. Many of the senior monks had the initial reaction, "We have gone without this science education for a very long time. Why should we have it now? If our system is working, why change?" It's a very human thing.

And even though it was His Holiness who was making the suggestion, monasteries are autonomous bodies. The abbots of each of these monasteries are the final authorities. And many of these abbots were ordinary monks who have come through the ranks and who have tremendous loyalty to and affection for the institutions. None of them would want to take a risk that would potentially lead to the undermining or downfall of the system.

One of the principal concerns that some express is this: "Back home in Tibet, the important cultural and historical institutions have all been destroyed. What we have in India is the only source of hope. And since the classical training is such a time-consuming, labor-intensive system anyway, why do we want to add on something that would tax the time of the students as well as distract their attention?" This is a very legitimate concern.

Another reason for the reluctance is fear of modernity, because they see young monks—and especially young reincarnate lamas—who are exposed to consumer culture and then leave monasteries. For example, in India the Hindi Bollywood culture is very seductive; disciplinarians struggle to ensure that the monks do not go off and watch movies. Science is seen as part of the modern world, part of what is seductive. So why bring it in?

How was this reluctance overcome? Over time, the Mind and Life conversations have brought home that there is a genuine synergy at least at the intellectual and philosophical level between some aspects of scientific thinking and Buddhist thought. The Science Meets Dharma and Science for Monks programs have been teaching science—not as a part of the mainstream curriculum but as a separate extracurricular program for a select group of monks—and these programs have been quite suc-

cessful. And there is a change of generation now in the leadership of the monasteries. The abbots are much more receptive to the idea of science education, and they appreciate the need to adapt.

In January 2013 there was a Mind and Life Conference in India at the request of His Holiness, and thousands of monks turned up. In his opening remarks, His Holiness spoke about the importance of making sure that there is a proper understanding of the place of science within the monastic education. The primary goal of the monastic system is to continue with the classical tradition. The introduction of science is not to replace that but to help enhance it. The monks shouldn't be distracted by or overemphasize the scientific component of their education in terms of how they spend their time and effort. So His Holiness understands that it needs to be done skillfully.

You've made a good case for how Buddhism and science could be seen as compatible. So I'm wondering how you might respond to an observation by the French philosopher of science Michel Bitbol that "in science and in Buddhism, the whole distribution of what counts as knowledge and what counts as ignorance is completely reversed." Isn't it true that in Buddhism ignorance is defined as the belief that things are stable and constant (rather than changing from one moment to the next), that they have intrinsic properties, and that they exist in and of themselves independent of one another and observers? But these ideas, Bitbol points out, "are exactly the presuppositions that are made in everyday work in science." I would agree with Michel Bitbol that the majority of scientists probably operate from that kind of assumption, which a Buddhist would see as being deluded. But there are other scientists who have a much more pragmatic view of the enterprise. They understand that these are constructs they have devel-

oped. The constructs are useful to come up with certain predictions and experiments, which then allow them to do certain things they couldn't do before. So there are other scientists who take their constructs not as representing what is "actually out there" but more like a working model that helps them to fine-tune their understanding.

And even from the scientific point of view, what we mean by truth is a problematic question. There is a lot of debate within the philosophy of science as to the status of scientific truths. The majority of scientists have a universalist and absolutist standpoint that "truth is truth regardless of our perspective." But others will have a different take, because the history of science itself shows that what was deemed to be true in one generation came to be modified later. These scientists will say that the idea that something is true regardless of who is looking at it or regardless of any framework makes no sense. Something can be said to be true only within a particular framework. This is why in Buddhism truth or falsity is considered within the framework of conventional reality, which takes into account the kind of background of language, shared consensus, and so on. When it comes to ultimate truth, you have emptiness, which is always negatively characterized. You cannot say anything about its attributes in language of objects and properties.

Might it be possible that the Buddhist worldview has something valuable to offer to the West, precisely in the ways in which it's incompatible with or different from science? I do think the point that Michel Bitbol is raising about Buddhism's ultimate challenge—or the skeptical question Buddhism raises about reification of some kind of ultimate and absolute indivisible constituent of reality—can be destabilizing to the entire scientific enterprise. Science operates from the assumption that you can build knowledge upon what others have done before, and that

although you may never get the picture completely, you are always getting closer to the ultimate picture. Buddhism in general—and particularly the Madhyamaka (Middle Way) philosophy—questions the very validity of that notion. So in that respect, Buddhism may actually challenge the whole scientific enterprise.

But on the other hand, you could have an understanding of science that is more pragmatic. You could see it as a tool—yet another tool—that helps human beings have a better understanding of the world and their relationship with it, and by which the knowledge that is deduced can lead to understanding how things function. Then you don't need to make that kind of ontological commitment that is problematic to Buddhists.

Another challenge Buddhism could offer is in its different view of human nature. For example, if you look particularly at Mahayana Buddhism—and especially East Asian Buddhism and the Kagyu and Nyingma strands of Tibetan Buddhism—there is an assumption that the basic nature of mind is not just pure but actually good and enlightened. There's actually a Buddha inside you; you just don't know it. Meditation is there to help you peel off the layers that are obscuring its expression, but it is completely there already—you don't need to cultivate it.

Not all Buddhist traditions make that assumption. For example, in the Tibetan tradition the Gelugpas don't make that assumption. The Gelugpas accept that the essential nature of the mind is pure. But they understand this purity in the sense of being "un-deluded"—not pure in the sense of "good" or "compassionate." For them, all of the qualities of enlightenment are there in the form of a seed, which needs to be cultivated. So it's not a question of simply removing all the layers that hide a real Buddha inside you. You need to actively cultivate that seed, because the basic nature of mind is neutral—neither good nor bad.

But that view of human nature as essentially good can be problematic for science, because in the end science's understanding of sentience has to be grounded in evolutionary theory. Evolution is the ultimate explanatory framework within which everything about human behavior and mental experience has to be accounted for. And within the evolutionary framework, it makes no sense to think of there being this kind of shining Buddha inside you.

Because that means we are basically altruistic? And that goes against an understanding of evolution by which we are all out for ourselves? Yes, although there is now a growing recognition in science that the selfish model of human nature may be a bit of an exaggeration. Anyway, concepts like the Buddha within are going to come up against scientific assumptions.

In the end, I think one other area where there will be a big stumbling block is the nature of consciousness. Some philosophers believe that science will never be able to have a full explanation of consciousness and that's why it's called the "hard problem." Unless science as we know it changes, I don't think science will ever come up with a final description of what consciousness is. The whole paradigm of science is from the third-person perspective. So within that paradigm, how can the first-person character of consciousness ever be captured? You can get closer and closer, but how are you going to finally get to the position where you describe the character of the experience of subjectivity in a comprehensive manner? What kind of language are you going to use? Science has to capture this first-person character of consciousness in some kind of scientific construct, but the language of science is all third-person-oriented. All of the models of science are really based on looking from outside in. It is object-oriented language and object-oriented descrip-

tion. Also, consciousness has the capacity to be self-aware. The third-person approach can never describe that.

In some sense, scientists do understand that at this point there is no actual evidence for their materialist standpoint, but at the same time most of them would agree that it is a kind of regulative assumption. They have to make that assumption to make any progress. All the current neuroscientific work is based on the assumption that ultimately consciousness is the brain. So I think this is one area where at some point there's got to be a parting of the ways.

On the other hand, if you have the conception of science I described before as having a limited scope, then it shouldn't be a problem. You would see it as just one of those things that falls outside the domain of scientific inquiry. And then there's no contradiction.

12

THE EMBODIED MIND

An interview with philosopher Evan Thompson

AUGUST 2014

To be fruitful, the encounter between Buddhism and science demands intellectual boundary crossers—rare scholars who are expert in both realms, who can translate ideas across the divide and identify and critically appraise assumptions each side brings to the table. The philosopher and cognitive scientist Evan Thompson is one of these. Thoroughly grounded in Western and Buddhist philosophy and learned in science, Thompson has been dedicated to cross-cultural and interdisciplinary dialogue between Buddhism and cognitive science for over two decades.

Bringing clashing points of view into conversation is a calling Thompson was born into. He is the son of the social philosopher and cultural critic William Irwin Thompson, who founded the Lindisfarne Association—an Esalen-like think tank and retreat devoted to "the study and realization of new planetary culture." Thompson grew up and was homeschooled at Lindisfarne, so from the time he was young—"a little kid gripped by philosophical questions"—he was surrounded by what he describes as the "passionate and sophisticated debate" of diverse thinkers from very different spiritual and academic backgrounds.

It was at Lindisfarne that Thompson met the renowned scholar of Tibetan Buddhism Robert Thurman. Thompson was so inspired by

Thurman's vision of philosophy (as "a transformative path of rational liberation with a global heritage," Thompson wrote in a tribute to Thurman) that he entered Amherst College at the age of 16 to study with him. It was also at Lindisfarne that Thompson met the Chilean biologist, philosopher, and neuroscientist Francisco Varela, now recognized as the founding father of the dialogue between Buddhism and cognitive science. Varela lived for several months at Lindisfarne as a Scholar-in-Residence and became a Lindisfarne Fellow and a family friend. Later, when Thompson was a graduate student, he studied with Varela at the École Polytechnique in Paris and in 1991 coauthored with Varela and the psychologist Eleanor Rosch *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience*. This was the first academic book to explore what Buddhist philosophy and meditation practices could offer cognitive science and to promote an "embodied" or "enactive" view of cognition; in tandem with Varela's Mind and Life meetings with the Dalai Lama, which had begun in 1987, their book launched the Buddhism-cognitive science dialogue. The Embodied Mind has since been translated into seven languages and will be published in a second edition in 2015.

Thompson is now a professor of philosophy at the University of British Columbia. His other books include *Mind in Life: Biology, Phenomenology, and the Sciences of Mind* and the forthcoming *Waking, Dreaming, Being: Self and Consciousness in Neuroscience, Meditation, and Philosophy*.

Tricycle spoke with Thompson at a conference that he co-organized at the University of California at Berkeley, where 15 top scholars from the field of Buddhism and science gathered to tackle the question "Given the current critiques of the Buddhism and cognitive science encounter, how might we proceed?" Thompson is among those who are steering the conversation toward not only compatibilities but also differences, even

contradictions, because that is where the partners in dialogue have most to learn from each other—and where, if given the chance, they may even find surprising complementarity.

—L.H.

Almost two and a half decades ago, in *The Embodied Mind*, you critiqued a notion of mind that was already prevalent then and that continues to frame much of the current neuroscience research on meditation. What is that view, and what is wrong with it? We criticized the view that the mind is made up of representations inside the head. The cognitive science version says that the mind is a computer—the representations are the software, and the brain is the hardware. Although cognitive scientists today don't think the brain works the way a digital computer does, many of them, especially if they're neuroscientists, still think the mind is something in the head or the brain. And this idea shows up in the neuroscience of meditation. But this idea is confused. It's like saying that flight is inside the wings of a bird. The mind is relational. It's a way of being in relation to the world. You need a brain, just as the bird needs wings, but the mind exists at a different level—the level of embodied being in the world.

What's your alternative view of the mind? The alternative view we put forward is that cognition is a form of embodied action. "Embodied" means that the rest of the body, not just the brain, is crucial; "action" means that agency—the capacity to act in the world—is central. Cognition is an expression of our bodily agency. We inhabit a meaningful world because we bring forth or enact meaning. We called this view "enaction" or the "enactive approach."

In the enactive approach, being human is a matter of inhabiting the

human world of culture and shared bodily practices. Of course we need our brain to do this, but we also need that world to be in place in order for the human brain to develop properly. The brain is what philosophers call a necessary "enabling condition" for mind and meaning, while enculturation is a necessary enabling condition for the brain. What's important is not just what is inside the brain but what the brain is inside of—the larger space of the body and culture. That is where we find mind and meaning.

It was early in your career—you were a doctoral student—when you cowrote *The Embodied Mind*. Looking back, do you have any regrets—things you would have changed, knowing now what you didn't know then? There was a certain way we talked about mindfulness that I now think is wrong. Sometimes we described it as a special kind of inner observation that lets you see the way your mind really is apart from being mindful—as if your mind were a box and your looking into it revealed what was there all along.

Do you mean the notion that in meditation you see "what really is there"? Yes, where "see" means looking inside to see how your mind really is apart from such looking. For example, we said that Buddhist meditation lets you see that your experience is really discontinuous and momentary, rather than a continuous flow. But one could just as well argue that certain kinds of meditation make experience gappy and then reinforce that gappiness by giving you a theoretical system that says that's how things really are, as the Buddhist Abhidharma philosophical systems do.

If we go back to the neuroscience of meditation, the idea that mindfulness is a kind of inner observation reinforces the mistaken idea that

the mind is in the head. It leads to thinking of mindfulness as a special kind of inner monitoring that scientists using brain imaging tools can identify with the activity of neural networks. This is a mistake. Mindfulness depends on the brain but isn't inside the brain. Certain neural networks may be necessary for mindfulness, but mindfulness itself consists in a whole host of integrated mind-body skills in ethically directed action in the world. It's not a neural network but how you live your life in the world.

Is the problem you are getting at the widespread assumption that mindfulness meditation is not mediated by concepts? Experience and concepts are interdependent. Whether there are nonconceptual modes of experience is a complicated matter that both Buddhist and Western philosophers have argued about a lot. But in most cases of human experience you can't have one without the other. Take science. Here you observe things, of course, but you can't see them properly unless you have the right concepts. If you just look through a microscope with no guidance on how to look at what you see, you have no clue what you're looking at. Even if you're doing high school biology, you need to have concepts like "cell wall" or "organelle"—to say nothing of what's happening at the edge of scientific discovery, where you're using new imaging technologies and learning to see things. So observation is happening there, of course. But also a *lot* of conceptualizing.

Similarly, if you go on a Vipassana retreat, you may spend the first day or so watching your breath, but then you're given a system of concepts for practicing mindfulness—concepts like "moment-to-moment arising," "pleasant versus unpleasant," "sensation," "intention," "attention," and maybe some categories from the list of elements, or *dhammas*, in Theravada Buddhist philosophy. It's a silent retreat, so this is the

only thing you hear, and everyone else around you is doing the same thing, so this shapes how and what you experience. You get a powerful and socially reinforced conceptual system for making sense of what you experience. That system in that context may help to bring about certain nonconceptual experiences, but the minute you start thinking about them—which there's no way to avoid doing—you're back in the land of concepts.

Practitioners might hear something like this and wonder, "If I'm not turning inward and seeing things as they are in and of themselves independently of my observing them, then what is my practice about?" I'd say it's about commitment to a certain way of life and participation in a community (sangha) that supports that way of life. It's about cultivating what we think are beneficial qualities of mind and body, and beneficial ways of acting or being in the world, as in the eightfold path. I'd say that practice in this full sense of the term, which goes well beyond sitting meditation, is its own purpose or goal and is itself the expression of a noble way of life. It's what philosophers and psychologists call autotelic, an end in itself, not a tool or instrument for something else.

I object when people reduce practice in this rich sense to a tool or instrument. Some people use the analogy that meditation is like an inner telescope: Outer science uses physical telescopes for looking at the stars, and inner science uses meditation for looking at the mind. I don't like that analogy. It makes you think of your relationship to your own mind in an instrumental way. Your relationship to yourself is precisely *not* an instrumental one. A telescope is a tool for looking at something separate and distant. Meditation isn't like that. If you think that awareness is an instrument that enables you to look within, on that analogy you're thinking of the inner realm as one of objectivity—except it's not, be-

cause it's subjectivity. If you think of meditation that way, you can't help turning your mind into an object, which is precisely what the mind is not. So here I think there is an important difference between meditation and scientific observation, despite the importance of concepts for making sense of both. Meditation can be very powerful and transformative: it can be very generative of insight, deep understanding, and connectedness. But not because it's an instrument or tool that enables you to see a hidden inner realm.

You mentioned that the appropriation of mindfulness as an object of scientific scrutiny and research has created new forms of self-understanding for Western meditators, so that meditators start to identify themselves in terms of their inner life and their subjectivity in terms of mindfulness. How does that happen? The ideas I'm working with here come from the Canadian philosopher Ian Hacking. He calls them "looping effects" and "making up people." When we categorize people—as poor, homeless, obese, gifted, and so on—we also change them as a result of how we interact with them based on these categories and how they come to think of themselves in terms of those categories. This is the "looping effect." Sometimes we even create new kinds of people who didn't exist before. This is "making up people." Take the category "citizen." We categorize ourselves as citizens, but there weren't any citizens before there were legal criteria and government procedures for applying this category. Hacking argues that this happens especially with medical and clinical categories.

I wonder whether this is happening with "mindfulness." An originally Buddhist notion is adapted for secular clinical programs like MBSR (Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction) and MBCT (Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy). To assess the efficacy of such programs, specifically

the idea that there's a distinct "mindfulness" component, we need a way to scientifically define and delimit that concept. This leads to various scales for measuring mindfulness—based on what people report about themselves in response to questionnaires—and efforts to assess mindfulness behaviorally. Also, some scientists think there may be biological markers of mindfulness, such as the activation of certain brain networks. I've even heard some scientists and Buddhist teachers say that if we knew what these biomarkers were, we could use them to help people become more mindful. So we already have looping effects: We interact with people differently and they think of themselves differently because of this new version of mindfulness that our culture—which is to say, we—is creating. We seem to be making up a new kind of "mindful person." Think of the mindful education movement and mindful parenting, or mindful eating and mindful sex, or mindfulness-based mind fitness training in the military—the list goes on.

Why is it important to recognize that this process is occurring in the popularization of mindfulness? It sets up a dichotomy between "mindful" and "unmindful," where we fixate on mindfulness so that it becomes a kind of fetish, and that blinds us to how the concept or category gets used, especially socially and politically. One of Hacking's points—and here he's really taking his lead from Michel Foucault—is that there are always social and political interests and power dynamics at work in looping effects and in making up people. People always get organized in certain ways for certain ends. Why should we think that it's any different in the case of the modern mindfulness movement? The Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Zizek has argued that the current fetishizing of mindfulness fits perfectly into a consumerist corporate culture that needs to pacify itself from the endless stress of modern capitalism. My way of

doing philosophy is very different from Zizek's, but I have to agree with him on this point. Those of us who work in this area have a responsibility to keep these looping effects and their social and political ramifications in critical focus. We need to know what we're gaining—and for the record, I do think that MBSR and MBCT are very beneficial—and what we're losing, or what we're creating that isn't beneficial. Buddhist scholars are contributing to this critical project by tracing the historical and philosophical evolution of the concept of mindfulness so that we can see how the Buddhist modernist and secular versions get generated. I try to contribute from the perspectives of cognitive science and philosophy by showing why it's not right to think of mindfulness as being in the head or brain, so we can see that it's social, relational, and ethical.

In 1996, Francis Crick stated that consciousness is now largely a scientific problem. As a philosopher, do you agree? If not, why not? No, I don't agree. There are important conceptual or philosophical issues that shape how we think about consciousness and how we investigate it. Crick's viewpoint, which most neuroscientists share, is that consciousness is in the brain, so the problem comes down to finding the neural correlates of consciousness. That's another expression of the mind-is-in-the-head idea. It's like saying a cathedral is in the stones. You need stones, of course, and you need them to be connected in the right way. But what makes something a cathedral is also iconography, tradition, and its being a place of worship. In other words, the larger context in which the structure is embedded helps constitute it as a cathedral. In an analogous way, consciousness isn't in the neurons or their connections. Here the larger context that constitutes consciousness—in the sense of sentience, or felt awareness—is biological: consciousness is a life-regulation process of the whole body in which the brain is embedded. In the

case of human consciousness, the context is also psychological and social. So even if we suppose—as I think it's reasonable to do, though some Buddhists will disagree—that the brain is necessary for consciousness, it doesn't follow that consciousness is in the brain. There are many scientific questions about how the brain enables consciousness, but those questions are miscast if they're made into the problem of how to locate consciousness in the brain in terms of its neural correlates.

It's also worth pointing out that Crick thought we might have a solution to the scientific problem of consciousness by the year 2000! And we still don't have one.

So you don't think progress in understanding consciousness is necessarily about doing more experiments? No. I mean, experiments are great, but we need conceptual work, theoretical work. We may need to radically change how we think about things in ways that are still not clear to us.

You have said that in seeking a way forward for the Buddhism and cognitive science dialogue, philosophy should take the lead. Why? Buddhism has very sophisticated and technical traditions of philosophy, every bit as sophisticated and technical as Western philosophy. Here we enter the arena of concepts, analysis, abstraction, models, and arguments, all of which bring us closer to science. Buddhist philosophy is very concerned with analyzing cognition, concepts, and consciousness—the subject matter of cognitive science. So this is the arena where I see Buddhism and science as having a lot to say to each other.

I also want to foreground problems of meaning—how these different traditions conceptualize the mind and what's at stake for them in doing so. It's really the *humanities* that need to take the lead in this

discussion now, not neuroscience. I think science is really important, so this is not an anti-science point; it's an anti-scientistic point. When you're concerned with meaning, you enter into a different space of discussion, where scientific methods are not sufficient.

I am particularly concerned to deploy that thought against the idea that the neuroscience of meditation should lead the way in this dialogue, because that's very much what the Buddhism-science discussion has been about for the past five or ten years now.

Has there been too much focus on the neuroscience of meditation? Yes, if we mistake this work to be a genuine Buddhism-cognitive science dialogue about the mind. Buddhism isn't reducible to meditation—most Buddhists throughout history haven't practiced sitting meditation. And cognitive science isn't the same as neuroscience; it's a broader endeavor concerned with a comprehensive scientific understanding of the mind and includes not just neuroscience but psychology, linguistics, computer science and AI, cognitive anthropology, and philosophy.

A cognitive science approach to meditation is concerned not with meditation per se but with using meditation to cast new light on basic cognitive phenomena like attention or consciousness. This means using meditation to generate new data and to test rival theories and models of the mind or to devise new ones. This can be especially valuable for the neuroscience of consciousness in conjunction with psychology and cognitive anthropology.

There is a widespread assumption that once certain metaphysical commitments are taken off the table—karma, rebirth, and the possibility of enlightenment on the side of Buddhism; physicalism, reductionism, and the causal closure principle on the side of science—Bud-

dhism and science are well-matched enterprises because they are both empirical systems interested in investigating the nature of reality. University of Michigan professor Donald Lopez has argued that such bracketing doesn't actually work to produce compatibility, because it takes out of play the most foundational topics on both sides, topics that are both regulative principles and the site of intractable differences. Do you think this strategy works? I think it has worked sometimes. In some way, the Mind and Life dialogues have been a paradigm of that bracketing strategy. But the most interesting moments in those dialogues are when the brackets come off. For example, to my mind, the richest of those dialogues is one of the early ones that was about the states of sleeping, dreaming, and dying, seen both from the Tibetan Buddhist perspective and from the perspective of Western science, so you have the neuroscientific viewpoint about the nature of consciousness confronting the Buddhist viewpoint. There's a moment when the Dalai Lama gives an explanation of his view of the dying process and of the subsequent bardos, a traditional Tibetan teaching, in the presence of the scientists. And the scientists push back against the idea that there is a consciousness that could somehow have a life apart from the brain. So the brackets are off and these views are confronting each other. Those are the moments I always look for.

Are there other strategies that might be more effective than bracketing for a meaningful Buddhism-science encounter? A different strategy, the one I use, is to conduct the dialogue in the arena of cross-cultural philosophy. Here the dialogue partner on the Buddhist side is Buddhist philosophy. In philosophy, everything can be up for grabs, but any move you make needs argumentative justification. Philosophy is concerned with issues of meaning. Science must always presuppose a

space of meaningfulness that it can't fully account for, and philosophy is concerned with that. Philosophy can show the limitations of certain scientific viewpoints—as I was doing just now with Crick's view of consciousness—so we can see more clearly the phenomena we're trying to understand. The Buddhist philosophical tradition becomes very important here, because it has original insights and arguments to offer.

From this cross-cultural philosophical perspective, we can't take science for granted; we have to remember that it operates within a human community of shared norms and values and practices—what phenomenologists call the "lifeworld." Science itself is a social practice that has the force and meaning it has because of its place in our lifeworld. Science can change the lifeworld, but it can never step completely outside it and provide some absolutely neutral perspective. To put the point another way, philosophy is concerned with the meaning of science—something that science on its own can't tell us. And Buddhist philosophy is as relevant as Western philosophy for thinking about the meaning of science.

This perspective can also help us to remember that there are different individuals and communities in the Buddhism-science encounter, and they have different things at stake. The Dalai Lama is a Tibetan refugee and a political figure, and so he's going to speak from a particular perspective; he has certain interests—intellectual and political and personal—that are motivating his participation in the dialogue. Buddhists like B. Alan Wallace and Matthieu Ricard are scientifically educated Westerners who have become Buddhists, so they're going to have a different stake in the dialogue. Tibetans like Thupten Jinpa, who was brought up in the refugee community and then was educated at a Western university, are going to have another perspective. Or take Francisco Varela, the founding scientist of the Mind and Life Institute, who was a brilliant neuroscientist and became a Buddhist through a charismatic

Tibetan Buddhist modernist teacher. In my own case, I grew up in the 1970s at the Lindisfarne Association, an institute that brought together scientists (including Varela), philosophers, and contemplative teachers, and this made me want to study Asian and Western philosophy in college and graduate school. So we're all participating in a shared discussion, but we have different backgrounds and histories. Our lifeworlds are shared, but we also have our particular emergence into them from our own places. Those kinds of things are not commented on very much, but they're actually at the heart of the encounter. After all, it's not really Buddhism and cognitive science that are encountering each other; it's Buddhists and cognitive scientists.

What do you see as the way forward for Buddhism and cognitive science? What I'd like to see is a collaborative effort to develop a much richer understanding of the human mind—a cognitive science of wisdom, for lack of a better term. For example, although self-knowledge is a topic of cognitive science research, it has yet to be informed by the kind of ethical and contemplative perspective that Buddhism upholds. We need to bring into cognitive science the recognition that the human mind can cultivate mature emotional and ethical capacities of benevolence along with cognitive capacities of deep insight and understanding. Right now cognitive science has a view of the mind that's rather narrow, where the database for mental function is mostly college students. Also, informed by that kind of cognitive science endeavor, I'd like to see a much more critical perspective on what's happening with the commodification of mindfulness and the social looping effects I was talking about before.

Do you feel that your community of researchers, who have developed and been engaged in this dialogue between Buddhism and cognitive

science, have any responsibility for how that research has been appropriated? Yes, definitely. I think it's very important, as I was saying before, that we draw on Buddhist studies, philosophy, and cognitive science—and I would add the history of science—to keep critically in view the larger social and political context in which we're working and how we may be contributing to deleterious kinds of looping effects. I've become very concerned about the growing fetishization of mindfulness I was talking about and how this is being appropriated by the corporate elite, including very right-wing elements. I was very dismayed to see the Mind and Life Institute co-sponsor an event with the American Enterprise Institute—a conservative think tank that helped give us the Iraq War—on "Happiness, Free Enterprise, and Human Flourishing." "Free enterprise" is a contradiction in terms that has caused a huge amount of suffering in the world. It disturbs me to see what appear as dumbed-down versions of mindfulness and hyped-up science being advertised at the World Economic Forum in Davos. Some of my Buddhist and scientist friends will say that participating in such events is skillful means, but I think that's naive. Social philosophy and policy aren't my areas of expertise, so I don't have readily available recommendations, but it's become increasingly important for me to think about these matters. My hope is that Buddhist studies, cognitive science, and philosophy can work together to analyze what's going on in ways that can be useful to activists and socially engaged Buddhists in their efforts to challenge consumerist appropriations of mindfulness and work for positive social, political, and environmental change

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A MORE HUMAN SCIENCE

An interview with Amedeo Giorgi

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When *Tricycle* asked me to introduce the Western intellectual tradition of human science to our readers, I knew it would be a challenge. This tradition originating in 19th-century Europe has profoundly influenced a wide range of fields in the humanities and social sciences. Over the years, *Tricycle* has highlighted—and I have written about—many thinkers who have been deeply influenced by it, including Robert Bellah, Charles Taylor, and Eugene Gendlin. But few Buddhists are aware that the tradition exists or that these scholars share an intellectual lineage. I knew little about human science myself, except that it included some of the most abstruse yet foundational philosophical theorists of the 20th century, such as Wilhelm Dilthey, Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, and Hans-Georg Gadamer. The prospect of taking them all on at once was daunting.

I started my research in the usual way: by borrowing armloads of books from the library. But the reading stopped me short. I felt like I was inching my way through a dense fog. Sometimes, though, there were extraordinary moments when the fog lifted, some light of understanding broke through, and I glimpsed how important these ideas were. But then, quickly, the clouds would close in again.

Then my editor sent me to meet Amedeo Giorgi, a renowned psychological theorist who is now in his eighties. Giorgi is a pioneer who has spent 50 years introducing human science perspectives into mainstream psychology and developing qualitative research methods for psychology based on the thought of the German philosopher Edmund Husserl. (Husserl founded the field of phenomenology, which studies human experience and consciousness.) Giorgi codeveloped the very first phenomenological psychology doctoral program in the United States at Duquesne University starting in 1962 and then initiated another like it at Saybrook University in 1986.

When we first met, Giorgi told me about his own encounter with the human science tradition. His story resonated with me, in part because it was reminiscent of how Buddhists talk about "meeting the dharma" as a kind of homecoming. From the time he was in college and first encountered the American philosopher and psychologist William James's writings on consciousness, Giorgi said, he had been driven by the question of what it means to be human. Believing that the field of psychology held the answer, he pursued rigorous training in experimental psychology. But during Giorgi's three years of undergraduate and four years of graduate work, none of his professors ever touched the question of consciousness. Instead, Giorgi told me, he got "physiology and tests and measurements and statistics and experimental psych." So when he became a psychology professor, he was deeply conflicted. "I didn't believe what I was teaching," Giorgi said. "I would present it and then rip it apart." But when a few years out of graduate school he stumbled upon the writings of human science philosophers, he knew right away that he had finally found what he had been looking for.

Giorgi has taught a lot of students. So when I relayed my difficulty with the reading to him, he understood right away. He explained that

because this way of thinking requires a fundamental reorientation in our mode of thought—it basically turns one's ordinary assumptions about the world upside down—learning it wasn't a straightforward ordinary matter of progressively accumulating knowledge. He reassured me that these flashes of "getting it" followed by "losing it again" were typical for novices. And then he gave me some pith advice: "You have to be prepared to stretch your understanding, maybe in uncomfortable ways, or you risk collapsing everything that is new into what you already know." I got it—this was a whole new way of seeing.

Over the next nine months, I met regularly with Giorgi. Our talks ranged from deep questions like "What is the difference between a living body and a dead one?" to practical ones like "Where can you find a good croissant in New Hampshire?" (Giorgi had just moved there from Berkeley.) During those meetings, Giorgi talked to me about this way of seeing, but he also modeled it—showing me, just in the way he responded to my questions, what very different intellectual moves one can make when starting from a different set of assumptions. I started to catch on to this new way of thinking. And as I did, I also began to understand how human science perspectives could recast the conversation between Buddhism and the contemporary world.

As Western practitioners, we are challenged to reconcile our modern education and everyday experience with a Buddhist sensibility born in a very different place and time.

In confronting this challenge, we have largely ignored an important question: *What's the best way to do that?* Instead, we typically assume that question has already been answered and we ask instead: "How do we reconcile Buddhism with science?"

What happens then? The scientific community typically doesn't engage with fundamental Buddhist metaphysical tenets like reincarnation

or karma that don't lend themselves to scientific validation; similarly, practitioners who consider themselves scientifically-minded can feel they have no choice but to dismiss as legends the claims made by masters of the Buddhist tradition to extraordinary experiences and yogic attainments that fall outside scientific credibility. Even the more scientifically acceptable spiritual experiences practitioners care about, like compassion or insight, can seem reduced or even unrecognizable once science has explained them in terms of physical causality. We can be left wondering, "Does knowing the neural correlates of our experiences, or their chemical or genetic causes, help us to grasp their *meaning*?"

If Buddhism is to take its place as a serious body of knowledge relevant to the modern world beyond just the margins, it must participate in sustained dialogue with contemporary forms of knowledge; certainly the dialogue with science is a necessary part of that. But what we generally think of as "science" (natural science) is not the only contemporary form of knowledge. The human science lineage from Dilthey and Husserl up to modern theorists like Giorgi has developed a parallel system of knowledge, equally exacting as natural science but specifically tailored for inquiry into meaning and human experience. If the Buddhist tradition wants to engage in a dialogue where it will be received and honored in its entirety, and if Western practitioners want to find an authentically Western perspective that accommodates and illuminates the things they care about, we might well consider the tradition Giorgi advocates. The human sciences can bring rigor and intellectual acuity to an encounter with Buddhism, but do so without denying or reducing to physical causes its cardinal experiences, values, meanings, and purposes. Such a dialogue will be both critical and mutually affirming.

—L.H.

Why do we need human science? What's wrong with using natural science to understand human beings? What most of us know as science is limited to science based on empiricism. But that science has grown up dealing with nature—physical things and processes. Now suppose I want to deal with humans. Of course humans are part physical, but not one hundred percent; you can't reduce a human person to a physical object, to his or her body. So from a human science perspective, the science will have to get modified, because now the subject matter is humans and relationships rather than physical things and processes. But what happens in the mainstream scientific tradition is that humans are taken to be simply another form of physical nature. So you reduce humans to a physicalist perspective (it is called "naturalism") and you keep doing science of the physical sciences!

But you *can't* reduce aspects of a human like consciousness and qualitative experiences to physicality. Can love be reduced to physical sensations? And what about the many types of love, like love for a daughter versus love for a wife versus love for an old parent? Are you going to put it all down into physical feelings? Naturalism says that subjectivity or consciousness has to be like nature—but what if subjectivity *isn't* like nature?

How is subjectivity different from nature? Say I'm a natural scientist and I examine an object. I don't care what the object is—it could be a rock, it could be a star, but it is always an object. Now I come to human beings. Even though a human being is a subject, the presupposition is that this is also an object like all the other objects we study. So I treat him as an object, and subjectivity is understood objectively, which is not taking into account that my consciousness is upholding and sustaining this world.

You insist that science needs to respect humanness. What do you mean? To respect humanness, you need to start out with a better philosophical anthropology—that is, a better conception of what it is to be human—one that gives humanness everything that belongs to it. Then you need to create the methods to study *that* adequately. The mainstream scientific tradition puts the cart before the horse: "We know what science is, so we apply these methods to humans."

We need to respect the question "What is a human being? What does it mean to be a person?" That's really critical. Of course it's tough to answer, and there's not only one answer. But the main idea is that if you take as a departure point some of the more humanistic understandings of person, you can't do the same things the natural sciences do, like assume that using the experimental method or quantifying a phenomenon is the best way to understand it.

Why call human science "science?" Why not come up with another word for it? Because it fits. Getting the most rigorous knowledge you can get, that is called "science." And we get knowledge about nature and natural phenomena, so why can't we get knowledge about humans and human phenomena? I want knowledge of human beings as genuine human beings in the world, which means that no reductionism is allowed. I'm saying that this can be done meeting these criteria of science: the results are rigorous, they can be replicated, and they can be criticized. I claim that any other phenomenologist who does this analysis should see what I saw; if they don't, there's something wrong. But I don't use the word *experimental*. I say I have "research situations," because "experimental" has too many connotations of cause and effect. To me it's meanings that matter, and meanings are not caused.

The idea that meanings are not caused is really at odds with a scientific view of the person where experience always seems to have some kind of genetic, chemical, or neuronal cause, or the popular psychological view of mental causation—say, that your neurosis goes back to something that happened in your childhood. Experience doesn't have to be causal. Theoretically there is room for other ways of understanding it. The whole idea that I had this early experience that makes me the way I am—no, not necessarily! You may *choose* to be that way and bring that in as an excuse, but from my perspective, that's not a cause because you *could* be other than the way you are. If it were a cause, you couldn't do other than that. If you drop a penny, gravity is going to pull it down; it has no choice. But on the human level, it's rarely that determined.

Husserl uses the word *motivation*. I look here and I'm motivated to go further. And then there is a kind of implicatory relationship among the meanings as they unfold through an experience. But the first meaning doesn't cause the second one; rather, it is implied—and I'm motivated to pick up that implication and then I see another implication. I'm choosing.

We don't deny causes. Cause and effect works in nature. Push me out the window and I'll obey the law of gravity. But that's not a human act; it is *I'm an object falling, obeying the law of gravity*. But what would be the psychological question? Not "How fast you were falling?"—that's a physical question. The psychological question would be something like, "My God! Why did you do it? Did you fall? Were you pushed? Are you trying to kill yourself?" The human question is: *Why*? What were your motivations?

With a natural science approach to religion people can feel like their spiritual experience isn't respected, because they get neural accounts

of what to them is a meaningful experience. So there's a gap there. You need a brain to experience, granted, but you can't reduce experience to the brain. The assumption always is that once we understand the brain fully, we'll understand human beings. Wrong! The brain is a marvelous organ, but it's not the whole human being. The person is more than that.

The other thing we don't understand well is life. As soon as a person dies, there's still the whole brain there. You want to ask, "Why isn't it doing what it used to be doing? What's going on?" "Life is gone," natural scientists say. But life—what's that? There are certain really obvious things that natural scientists often ignore, like you need a live human being!

A lot of biology is still mechanistic in its approach, because we understand how mechanisms work, and we apply that understanding to the body. But the body is not mechanistic. Any machine you can take apart and put back together. You can't do that to a body. Why? Because there's *life*.

Husserl introduced the notion of "lifeworld." What is it? There are several meanings in Husserl, but the basic meaning of *lifeworld* is the ordinary world as we live it in everyday life. Pre-scientific. Pre-any specialization whatsoever. You and I meeting at the door was a lifeworld experience. You were looking around for me, checking if this is the right apartment, and I was looking out for you. We met and we said hello. That's lifeworld. For Husserl the lifeworld is the basis of anything else you want to do. The world of science presupposes the lifeworld. The world of economics presupposes the lifeworld. The world of entertainment presupposes it. The lifeworld is that most fundamental everyday life experience that one has. It is the absolute ground of any other world that may develop.

How does that compare to a scientific conception of the universe? The scientific concept would be a derived understanding. Husserl makes a distinction between the lifeworld and a specialized world. For example, say I want to talk about the world of math. Mathematics is all that matters now. But the lifeworld has much more than math in it. Or take the world of entertainment. Are you a good singer? Let me see if we can use you. Will your talent fit the entertainment world? Will we respond to how you sing? You keep adding specifications that meet entertainment criteria—but the world itself is bigger than entertainment. So any other world *narrows* all that happens in the lifeworld. Or say now I'm going to be a natural scientist. Then all of a sudden I've got certain presuppositions like that the "really real" is the physical. But that is the world of natural science specifying certain criteria that are narrower than the lifeworld criteria. It is building a specialized world. Then you try to put the results of the specialized world back into the lifeworld, and sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't. Natural science builds a specialized world, but when it tries to go back to the everyday world, that doesn't always work, because the everyday world is richer than what the natural sciences produce.

How does the world of natural science become the whole world for many scientists? They make it a privileged world, so that unless you meet scientific criteria, they are not going to take you seriously. There are explicit movements like positivism that make statements like that: "Unless it's perceptually given to me or unless I can experiment with it, then I'm not going to take it seriously." Somebody has an extraordinary experience and they'll say, "That's not possible. Science doesn't understand that, so I'm going to dismiss it." But even ordinary experiences like friendship are difficult for natural science to account for in a way

that isn't reductionist. They might try to explain it physiologically, for example: two rats like to touch each other because it is rewarding, so that is why they became friends.

So you're saying that the lifeworld is most fundamental, and then there are all these specialized worlds that are derivative from the lifeworld. And what happens with natural science is that one particular derivative model of the world then gets reapplied back over all worlds. It is established as a priority over the lifeworld. What happens in natural science is "really real," and what's in the lifeworld is not. Phenomenology reverses that. Phenomenology says, no, the primary thing is the lifeworld, and *science* is a derived world.

Let me put it this way. We're beings in the world. "World" means *everything*. It means nature, humans, consciousness—anything you can find there. How do we get nature? World minus all consciousness, all subjectivity, gives you physical nature. Then how are you going to go from physical nature back to subjectivity, when you have removed subjectivity? But that's exactly what psychology [conceived as a natural science] is trying to do. They're saying subjectivity is a being of nature. No, subjectivity is a being in the world. You need worldness, which means consciousness, spirituality, morality, values—and whatever else you want to have—because the whole shebang is there in world. The initial situation is *world*, not nature.

I can see how this perspective counters scientism, the belief that natural science is authoritative in every area of investigation. It gives breathing room for religion and science to coexist, for example, or for art, literature, or other humanistic disciplines to stand on equal footing with science. Genuine science says, "I admit I'm a perspective. And

I do come up with certain good things, but I acknowledge the legitimacy of a theological perspective, a philosophical perspective, an aesthetic perspective . . ." But scientism doesn't: "You can fool around with those things if you want, but they don't really count. Only science counts." But it's very difficult to argue with advocates of scientism, because they use the criteria of that system as their criteria. So they might say, "Prove to me that there is a spiritual dimension to human experience." How can I *prove* that according to their criteria? Remember ESP? They would try to do experiments like "predict the card that's going to come." To me that's ridiculous! You're not going to prove ESP in that way, because you're submitting to the situation of natural science to prove something that natural science doesn't believe in. It is in the *world*, but you can't establish it by means of an experiment.

Buddhist texts also speak of experiences that science doesn't believe in or cannot establish, like clairvoyance or mind-to-mind transmission. In what sense are such experiences legitimate if science can't establish them? Why is science the criterion here? At Lourdes, for example, Bernadette Soubirous saw the Blessed Mother. Am I going to wait for science to prove that? She had a vision of the Blessed Mother. Church authorities looked at it and examined it: "Are you making up a tall story?" "No." "Are you lying?" "No." You go on and you finally say, "I guess she really did."

Are you saying that there are other means of establishing legitimacy? Yes.

Or that "legitimacy" has a different meaning? No.

Are you still meaning that it really happened? Yes.

In a scientific or a historical sense? In a historical sense, not scientific.

Okay, but did it *actually* happen? I would not turn to science for that.

Suppose there were three people in the room and one of them saw the Blessed Mother and the other two didn't. Did it happen? If I examine it and find it to be true.

But on what basis are you finding it to be true? On the basis of the evidence of her speech, the description of the vision itself, the plausibility of it—a lot of different criteria like that. I might make up criteria as I go along. "If you really saw this vision, then what are the consequences?" At Lourdes, a spring came up and water came, so there was some physical evidence to go along with the vision. But I would not turn to science to legitimate that.

You mean that there are other frameworks for legitimizing than science. But that also must change the meaning of what it means to be legitimate. No. Legitimacy means that you give credence to an event, but there are other ways of solidifying evidence.

Think of it like this: There are different ways of establishing legitimacy, according to how a phenomenon presents itself. For example, if we are to judge a piece of music or a painting, we have to use different criteria, because one is auditory and the other visual. So to judge a religious phenomenon by scientific criteria is like a category mistake, and the opposite is equally true. We need religious criteria for religious phenomena and scientific criteria for scientific phenomena. The world is too

rich and versatile to be judged by one type of criterion only. But there's not one set of criteria for everything.

Are there other things that count as evidence then? Depends on the nature of the phenomenon. If a person says he is feeling depressed, how am I going to know if he isn't just saying that? Well, watch him. Is he gloomy? Does he not do much? Is he suicidal? So we won't leave him alone or leave knives near him. Isn't that some way of responding to this reality—the guy is suicidal—without being "scientific" about it?

Then how would you legitimize ESP, for example? You said it wouldn't be through an experiment where you test it, so what *would* be a way to legitimize something like that? I once got a proposal from a student who wanted to research ESP experiences. She found a woman who thought that her husband was having an affair and not telling her. He was supposed to be at work, and the woman said she got this vision of him being in a certain place with another woman. She got in the car, drove, and he was there. Now is that evidence?

You could say: She had good intuition. She knew how to read his behavior. She had maybe watched him have a conversation with the woman. But *she* says, "I had this vision of him there."

That's what she *says*. She said, "I could just see him. Then when I went there, and exactly what I had the vision of is what I saw when I arrived."

So you *are* still looking for some kind of evidence, aren't you? Sure. We look for evidence. Only faith doesn't have evidence.

But not the kind of evidence a card experiment would produce? A card experiment is not a vital thing. Can I pick the right card that's going to come up? What changes in the whole world? Nothing. Whereas this other one, "My husband's having an affair"—that's pretty vital!

I see. You are saying that when people report an ESP experience, it is usually within a deep meaning structure. An experiment isolates the event from its meaning. And doesn't that change its identity? So what the scientists were looking at in that experiment wasn't even ESP. They are testing *something*. They are testing the ability of a guy to guess the next card. But so what?

Either ESP is possible or it isn't possible. How would you find out? I would go to the lifeworld where there are people making these claims. How can I give some kind of credible evidence to the claims? And if there's no evidence, then it falls back on faith; either you believe or you don't believe.

So anything experienced is part of the lifeworld? The lifeworld doesn't just include what actually exists? The lifeworld is the sum total of anything that people can even imagine. If I come across something like ESP, for example, I don't experience it; I'm on the skeptical side. But I'm open. Tell me the story. Tell me your experience. Then I'll look around and say, "Is there some way for me to support that?" And if not, then there's still the option to believe it in faith. Or I'll say, "You know, it's something I don't think I can believe in without more evidence." And I don't think I can have evidence for everything. There's more things in the world than I can count on, in that sense. And I'm comfortable with that. I don't have to understand everything. I can't!

There is much hope and anticipation, especially among nonscientists, that advances in neuroscience will soon solve the mysteries of human nature. What do you make of this? Psychology follows fads and technology. The cognitive revolution was because of the computer. Imagine, we take something the humans invent—the computer—and then we use that as the model for the human who invented it! It took a while but finally now cognitive psychologists are saying maybe the computer is not the best model for the way the mind really thinks. So then neuroscience comes along with the fMRI machines—and if it weren't for fMRIs we wouldn't have an emphasis on neuroscience. But that's reductionist also, and it's not going to lead anywhere, in my view.

What would be the way forward, in your view? We have to come to grips with what I call "the non-palpable." Husserl claims there are *irreal* objects. For example, the concept of justice—where is it? For Husserl, "anything in space, time, and regulated by causality" is real. But we have ideas; so where is the idea? The empiricists and the positivists say that since there's nothing there, the mind must produce it. They make it a psychological thing—something the mind does. Husserl says, no, it's just as much of an object as that coffee table, but it's not a *real* object. It's an *irreal* object. It doesn't have the characteristics of a real object, because it's not in space, time, or causality. But it still is an object, because I can say meaningful things about it, I can describe instances of it, and I can tell you what it means.

So the big breakthrough is: we've got to admit the irreal. We have to acknowledge that there are such things as non-palpable objects that are psychologically very meaningful.

And you are not just talking about extraordinary phenomena like

ESP, right? Because by Husserl's "space, time, causality" definition, all qualitative phenomena are irreal: friendship, love, happiness, spiritual experience, meaning… They are all irreal! And that's why what we need is that breakthrough where we admit that there can be irreal presences, like ideas. Then you cannot reduce everything to looking in the brain. Do you really expect to find an idea in the brain?

So is this the reason why people think understanding the brain will solve all the mysteries of human nature: they haven't acknowledged the existence of the irreal? Right. Because in the sciences, as soon as you admit irreal, they say, "You are getting religious," and they don't ever want to let religion come in. You're also getting subjective, and they're trying to be objective. Subjective is dangerous because it leads to religion. Everything that leads to religion gets squelched at the beginning. It's sort of like the NRA; you can't let a single law about guns go through, because that's the end. Human science is a slippery slope to religion. As soon as you say nonmaterial, spirit, ideas…

And yet friendship, love, happiness, spiritual experience, meaning… They're in the world like justice! But no, that's not natural science, see? That's where they come in with: "We're scientists. We don't accept everything that's in the world. It's our task to correct the world."

The whole point is: Can you see a psyche? No—the very subject matter of psychology is irreal! [*Laughs.*]

That's why until they start acknowledging the irreal, they are not going to get anywhere. How do you know you're conscious? Do you taste, smell, hear, see, or touch consciousness? No. Consciousness itself is irreal! It's not known by empirical data. So it's a huge phenomenon that has to be acknowledged. They turn to the brain, because it is senso-

rial—you can look at it and touch it. And they keep thinking by understanding the brain they're going to understand consciousness. I say it's a big category error.

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A NEW WAY FORWARD

Buddhist tradition and modernity are in many ways incompatible. But one Western intellectual tradition may hold a key to bringing the two into meaningful dialogue.

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When I first started to practice Tibetan Buddhism, I was puzzled by a habit my teacher had. Every time Lama Zopa Rinpoche began a teaching or meditation session, he had us set our motivation. Bringing to mind the sufferings sentient beings endure, we raised the aspiration to attain buddhahood to be able to free them. When the dharma session was over, he dedicated the merit to that goal. Sometimes we never got beyond setting the motivation. Just as the packs of Kathmandu street dogs erupted in nightfall chorus, Rinpoche would launch into elaborate descriptions of the sufferings of samsara. By the time he dragged through human-realm troubles like birth, old age, sickness, and death, and started in on the 18 hells, the roosters were crowing, some of us were passed out on the floor asleep, and it was time to begin the dedication. While Rinpoche's single-minded emphasis on this bookending ritual was perhaps a bit extreme, I came to learn that motivating and dedicating are a constant of this tradition. It seemed like one of those cultural quirks—a kind of spiritual "fork-goes-on-the-left knife-on-the-right" nicety that modern Westerners could do without. Weren't we here for the teaching and practice themselves?

After a half-decade's immersion in Tibetan Buddhist culture and practice, I returned from Asia and moved to a university town. I had extra time on my hands, so I started auditing undergraduate classes and graduate seminars. I was secretly making a reality check: if the Buddhist understanding of the nature of reality is correct, shouldn't someone in the West have stumbled on it too? Over a dozen classes later, I still hadn't found what I set out looking for. But in the process of trying to replicate a Buddhist worldview within a Western understanding of the world, I discovered something more important—that such an effort is misguided. The Western tradition could offer something much more valuable to my practice than confirmation of my intuitions—Buddhist or otherwise. It could teach me how to question them.

Challenging my own assumptions might seem like a strange way to develop faith in my religion, so let me give an example. One day I stumbled on an essay by the anthropologist Clifford Geertz about the nature of his field. Most people know that anthropologists try to make sense of cultures that are often very alien to their own. But there is a common impression, writes Geertz, that they go about their task primarily by means of objective study: "establishing rapport, selecting informants, transcribing texts, taking genealogies, mapping fields, keeping a diary, and so on." Yet the heart of the work, he insists, is in fact interpretation. To illustrate, Geertz draws an example from the British philosopher Gilbert Ryle:

> Consider, he [Ryle] says, two boys rapidly contracting the eyelids of their right eyes. In one, this is an involuntary twitch; in the other, a conspiratorial signal to a friend. The two movements are, as movements, identical; from an I-am-a-camera, "phenomenalistic" observation of them alone, one could not tell which was twitch

> and which was wink, or indeed whether both or either was twitch or wink. Yet the difference, however unphotographable, between a twitch and a wink is vast, as anyone unfortunate enough to have had the first taken for the second knows. The winker is communicating, and indeed communicating in a quite precise and special way: (1) deliberately, (2) to someone in particular, (3) to impart a particular message, (4) according to a socially established code, and (5) without cognizance of the rest of the company. As Ryle points out, the winker has not done two [separate] things, contracted his eyelids and winked, while the twitcher has done only one, contracted his eyelids. Contracting your eyelids on purpose when there exists a public code in which so doing counts as a conspiratorial signal is winking.
>
> ("Thick Description:
> Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture")

Geertz's point is clear. Humans don't move like automatons. They act meaningfully. To understand the meaning of what they do, you have to know the context for their actions, because meaning is always contextual.

Later, when I sat down to my practice, I was still thinking about Geertz's essay—and something simply clicked. I realized I had been impatient with the Buddhist tradition of motivating and dedicating because I assumed that a dharma teaching or meditation practice could stand alone. I had been confused about the nature of meaning, so I was applying a scientific kind of analytic thinking—by which I took for granted that removing something from its context is how you better understand its essence—to a type of object that, by its nature, resists decontextualization. When it comes to understanding what humans are

up to, Geertz points out, "most of what we need to comprehend a particular event, ritual, custom, idea or whatever is insinuated as background information before the thing itself is directly examined." Like opening and closing an eye, spiritual actions have no meaning or efficacy in and of themselves. As someone grounded in a tradition, Lama Zopa worked from the premise that keeping his students awake all night could either be torturing them or leading to their enlightenment, depending on their motivation; hence his exhaustive framing.

As modern Western Buddhists confronting an ancient Eastern religion, we are meeting a vastly different world. How do we navigate this challenge? Given that our sensibilities have been shaped by our modern knowledge of history, science, and pluralism, it isn't easy—indeed, it may not even be possible—for us to abandon our own worldview and naively exchange it for a new one. If we are honest with ourselves, we cannot overlook the fact that traditional Buddhism and modernity have jarring contradictions. But if our solution then is just to lift from the tradition the teachings that make sense to us, while remaining unaware of both the context in which the teachings were given and our own blind spots in appropriating them, we risk getting the message wrong. We might even reinforce the very things that are problematic about ourselves and our society that the teachings are meant to subvert. The sociologist of religion Robert Bellah warned in a 2004 interview with *Tricycle*:

> Zen Buddhism began in Japan at a time when strong social structures hemmed in individuals on every side. The family you were born to determined most of your life chances. Buddhism was a way to step outside these constricting structures. Becoming a monk was called *shukke*, literally, "leaving the family." We live in an almost completely opposite kind of society, where all insti-

> tutions are weak and the family is in shambles. You don't need Buddhism to "leave the family." To emphasize primarily the individualistic side of Buddhism (especially Zen) in America is only to contribute to our pathology, not ameliorate it.

Even to begin navigating differences requires that we clearly see what the differences are. As Bellah shows, seeing those differences depends on first understanding Buddhist tradition on its own terms. And to get there necessitates becoming aware of a whole slew of tacit assumptions that could be biasing our interpretation. In short, if our goal is to understand Buddhism accurately and to integrate it into our own lives authentically, we have to develop deep understanding both of Buddhist tradition *and* of ourselves. But how?

Coming to understand the cultural and historical factors biasing our beliefs, attitudes, and ways of thinking is like setting out on a journey on a road that stretches back behind rather than out before us. To walk this road is to retrace the *conditions of possibility* for our experience: taken-for-granted factors that both facilitate and shape it—the pre-reflective, the implicit, the pre-given—what Geertz referred to as "whatever is insinuated as background information before the thing itself is directly examined."

This background includes assumptions about existential fundamentals like the nature of externality and internality, the self, time, knowledge, and truth. It includes bodily assumptions: the know-how humans have that allows them—without having to think about it—to climb over obstacles or pass through open doors or, for that matter, recognize a wink. It includes social and linguistic conventions; moral, ethical, and religious norms; political ideologies of gender, race, class, power, and authority; and personal history. In short, background includes ev-

erything we *don't* see in order *to* see a particular thing. It is vast, inchoate, and inexhaustible.

Background is hard to identify because we're embedded in it, but it lights up when it hits up against difference. The meeting of modernity with Buddhism can illuminate this background territory on both sides. When that happens, as self-evident as our own background convictions may have seemed until then, it is important to keep in mind that they have not been established as "true" or "false"; they are "taken for granted," and that means something very different. Just as axioms in geometry are not themselves proven but are the basis for proof, background is what we rely on when we make judgments like truth and falsity. Background assumptions are in this sense like rules of a game: someone playing by different rules isn't necessarily playing our game wrong—sometimes they are playing a different game.

If we mistake unquestioned convictions to be truths about the external world, we live them as ideologies. Any recovered alcoholic knows that the first step toward shaking an addiction is recognizing that you have one. But as many scholars of modernity have observed, when it comes to confronting their own ideological addictions, modern Westerners tend to be particularly lacking in self-awareness.

There is a good reason for this. As post-Cartesian rationalists, we imagine ourselves to be competent knowers; and unless we give the question of "what it means to know" some critical thought, we might assume that knowing is like holding a mind-mirror up to the world—that the images in the mind reflect the objective facts. This picture of knowing takes background territory off the map, because we imagine that those mind-images are direct, unmediated, unframed, and literal—that they reflect the external world *just the way it is*. In short, we assume that we don't have any assumptions. The French philosopher and sociol-

ogist of science Bruno Latour described it this way: "A Modern is someone who believes that others believe." A modern Buddhist, in Latour's sense, is someone who believes that Asian forms of Buddhism carry the "baggage" of their host cultures but who remains unreflective about the assumptions that shape his or her own modern adaptations.

We also underestimate the differences we are bridging. We tend to think that people everywhere are basically the same. We don't see this mistake in part because it aligns with our deep materialist convictions. (We do, after all, have the same kinds of bodies.) We make this mistake when we imagine that our Western tradition and the Buddhist tradition are each monolithic and that the Western tradition means science. Knowing that both Buddhism and science investigate "how things are," we assume they are both engaged in discovering objective facts. Then we think that what we need to do to bring them together is to locate the common ground. But if we simply assume that the Western tradition means science, we overlook that Western thought also includes *critiques* of science, and, further, we neglect Western literature, the arts, the humanities, and (ironically) religion; we also ignore the tremendous pluralism within Buddhism. But what makes this picture of sameness particularly misleading is that it compels us to imagine that differences are extraneous—that they are *what we get rid of* to better understand Buddhist tradition. And if we assume *that*, we never take the first step on the journey to deep understanding. This journey is going to be, as Geertz describes, "a descent into the swirl of particular incident, particular politics, particular voices, particular traditions, and particular arguments, a movement across the grain of difference and along the lines of dispute." Such an investigation, he warns, "is indeed disorienting and spoils the prospect of abiding order." But it may also, he has written, "prove the surer path toward understanding."

In this regard, we can follow the footsteps of great thinkers from our native Western intellectual tradition, such as the German philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859–1938), founder of the field of phenomenology, which is an approach to the study of human experience and consciousness. Husserl thought deeply about how we come to know what we know. Is it really true that the world exists in the way it appears and that the mind is passively and reliably mirroring it? (Husserl called this common-sense notion "the natural attitude.") Did he know that for sure? If not, was *any* knowledge rock-hard certain? He wondered if maybe the structure of the mind itself shapes what we know, as his predecessor Immanuel Kant had suggested. If that were the case, how could we be certain of *that*? In this questioning, Husserl faced a chicken-or-the-egg dilemma: the natural attitude took for granted that reliable knowledge of the external world was possible, but it was precisely the possibility of reliable knowledge that Husserl was questioning. He couldn't test whether or not the natural attitude was true if he had to rely on the natural attitude to do the testing.

Husserl reasoned that he could not be sure whether objects existed out in the world independently of his mind; after all, he could be hallucinating them. But he could be certain that the objects in his consciousness appeared *as though* they were in the world. So in the interest of gaining knowledge more certain than any the natural attitude could provide, he decided to put aside the question of whether experiences match external reality and instead home in on the experiences themselves *as people experience them*. Through this technique of bracketing the natural attitude, Husserl set aside third-person research methodologies and in their place developed rigorous methods to study experience from the first-person point of view. His appeal to go "back to the things themselves" is an invocation to approach experience in this direct, fresh, and open-

minded way. For Western Buddhists who really want to listen to what Buddhist tradition is saying, Husserl gives us powerful intellectual tools: legitimate reasons and practical methods for paying attention to what an experience might *mean* without first insisting that it prove itself to be objectively real or scientifically verifiable.

To better understand the implications of phenomenology for Buddhists, I turned to a brilliant phenomenological theorist who is an expert on Husserl—Amedeo Giorgi. For 50 years, Giorgi has pioneered the introduction of phenomenological perspectives into the field of psychology. He codeveloped the very first phenomenological psychology doctoral program in the United States at Duquesne University starting in 1962 and then initiated a similar program at Saybrook University in 1986. Retired, widowed, and now in his eighties, Giorgi graciously welcomed me to the studio apartment he shares with his 125-pound jet-black Newfoundland named Viking. We met several times over a period of months.

At our first meeting, Giorgi told me right away that he didn't know anything about Buddhism. So as we sat down, I told him why I had come.

I briefed him about the challenge Western Buddhists have in reconciling our Buddhist perspective with a modern understanding of the world. Many Buddhists, I explained, assume that means reading a Buddhist worldview through a scientific one. This assumption that "to be Western and modern means to be scientific" also reigns in academia, I told him, where the most fashionable interlocutor for Buddhism today is neuroscience. And then I pointed out the problem: whether on the cushion or in the laboratory, Buddhism and science resist an easy fit. A good deal of Buddhism—even including, ironically, the very notion of buddhahood—doesn't lend itself to scientific validation or materialist empiricism. Consequently, to make Buddhism fit with what is perceived

to be our best knowledge of the world, much of what constitutes the Buddhist tradition itself needs to be dismissed. In the process, this rich tradition gets reduced to a set of concepts and techniques stripped of the context that gave them meaning. I was looking for some other way to open the deadlock between Buddhism and modernity, I told Giorgi, and I thought Husserl's thinking might hold a key.

Giorgi listened to all this closely. The moment I finished, he launched into a reply.

There's a limitation built into science, he explained. What we usually think of as science is physical, or natural, science—an empirical discipline that originated in the study of the physical world. When natural science uses the same quantitative and experimental approach that rendered physical phenomena intelligible to try to make sense of human phenomena like culture, psychology, or religion, it falls short.

But why?

"Because human beings are different from physical objects," he stated matter-of-factly. "They have consciousness!"

Humans live in a realm of meaning, values, ethics, and purpose, Giorgi explained. And that is not made intelligible in the same way the physical world is. Approaching humans with the same assumptions, methods, and goals that worked on atoms, galaxies, or cells is like using a hammer to pound in a screw—it is just not the right tool for the job.

"We need to start with a better conception of what it is to be human," he said, "one that gives humanness everything that belongs to it. And then create the methods to study *that* adequately. The mainstream scientific tradition puts the cart before the horse." He gestured with his hands, one in front of the other. "We know what science is, so we apply these methods to humans. Of course you don't miss entirely studying human phenomena with a natural science approach, but in my view you

get trivial information."

Giorgi wasn't denying that human beings are *in part* physical. What he was objecting to was the fallacy of starting an inquiry into what humans are with an assumption of already knowing what they are—that is, that they are *only* physical. Because the starting assumptions define the scope of the inquiry, he noted, a lot of things that people actually experience get left out. For example, he said, "Suppose I want to say that human beings have consciousness or a kind of spirit. 'Nope! That's mysterious. You're going into another realm.' 'Oh, well then, how about the brain?' 'Oh, that is OK.'"

Part of the problem, Giorgi explained, is that natural scientists are used to dealing with objects like stars and rocks. So they treat human beings like every other object they study, disregarding the fact that humans are not only objects, they are also subjects. To the extent that natural science is committed to an objective, view-from-nowhere, third-person approach, the things that matter most about humans—like their inner life, motivations, ethics, and values—remain elusive.

"Scientists have presuppositions that transform what they're studying into something they're familiar with," Giorgi said, "so they undersell consciousness. They don't understand its truly unique capabilities and how different it really is from nature. And this is why Husserl says 'Back to the things themselves.' Go back to the phenomena as they present themselves; you have to deal with them un-prejudicially."

Giorgi is a proponent of an intellectual tradition called human science, which originated in late 19th-century European philosophy with the German philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey. Human science was developed by a long progression of esteemed thinkers, including some of the most innovative and heavy-hitting theorists of the Western philosophical tradition, such as Husserl, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jean-Paul

Sartre, Simone deBeauvoir, Max Weber, Walter Benjamin, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Paul Ricoeur. Phenomenology comes from human science, as does modern hermeneutics (the study of the nature of interpretation), and the tradition has influenced a wide range of fields in the humanities and social sciences.

Recognizing the shortcomings of applying a natural science approach to human beings, these thinkers developed a science specifically tailored to the task. Like natural science, human science seeks knowledge that is secure, replicable, and verifiable. But it starts out with nonmaterialist assumptions, and it uses different methods—qualitative rather than quantitative ones. "Human science explicitly deals with human cultural and social worlds; natural science deals with nature," Giorgi explained. "Humans are ambiguous—some people say, 'Humans are just natural, we just find ourselves in the world like trees and stones, so why are you making a special category?' Human scientists say, 'There is a certain kind of consciousness in the case of humans that is difficult to subsume under the categories of nature. So we feel that this requires a different kind of thinking, a different kind of describing, and a different kind of analysis.'"

Intellectual movements on occasion drop bombshell ideas so powerful their impact overturns an entire field and clears new vistas for thinkers across disciplines. Freud's notion of the unconscious, for example, was one of these high-impact ideas. Husserl's bombshell was the *lifeworld [Lebenswelt]*.

"There are several meanings in Husserl," Giorgi told me, "but the basic meaning of lifeworld is *the ordinary world as we live it in everyday life*. Prescientific. Pre-any-specialization-whatsoever. You and I meeting at the door was a lifeworld experience. You were looking around for me, checking if this is the right apartment; and I was looking out for you. We

met and we said hello. That's lifeworld."

We're used to thinking of the world as the sum of all that exists—meaning all that exists in a non-imaginary, scientifically verifiable, and objectively real sort of way. Galaxies are in the universe; unicorns are not. But the lifeworld is bigger than that, Giorgi told me. Remember that Husserl bracketed the question of the objective reality of experiences; to discover what could be known with certainty, he took out of play the notion of "really there" or "not really there." The totality he was interested in was the sum total of possible experiences, including, said Giorgi, "everything that people can even imagine." That totality includes the objective world plus the subjective one. It also includes the more primordial realm of the conditions of possibility that give rise to subjectivity and objectivity in the first place, and so—importantly—it puts background territory back onto the map.

"For Husserl the lifeworld is the basis of anything else you want to do," Giorgi explained. "The world of science presupposes the lifeworld. The world of economics presupposes the lifeworld. The world of entertainment presupposes it. So the lifeworld is that most fundamental everyday life experience that one has. It is the absolute ground of any other world that may develop."

From Husserl's perspective, any specialized world is derived from the lifeworld. Specialized worlds have certain criteria that define them, and those criteria are always narrower than lifeworld criteria. This perspective has enormous implications for science because it shows up the assumptions that frame natural science as exactly that—assumptions. For example, "Say I'm going to be a natural scientist," Giorgi said, "then all of a sudden I've got certain presuppositions, like 'The really real is the physical.'"

The fact that specialized worlds are founded on presuppositions

isn't the problem. Assumptions shape a sub-world, define it, and enable it to function. The problem comes, said Giorgi, when people try to put the results of the specialized world back into the everyday world, which is richer. He shrugged. "Sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't."

"You are talking about a plural understanding of worlds, which is not necessarily an assumption that natural science would share," I said. "But how does the world of natural science become the whole world for many scientists?"

"They make it a privileged world," he said, "so that unless you meet scientific criteria, they are not going to take you seriously. And there are explicit movements like positivism that make statements like 'Unless it's perceptually given to me or unless I can experiment with it then I'm not going to take it seriously.' Somebody has an out of the ordinary experience and they'll just say, 'That's not possible. Science doesn't understand that, so I'm going to dismiss it.'" Giorgi rested his chin on his fingers thoughtfully. "But even ordinary experiences like friendship are difficult for natural science to account for in a way that isn't reductionist. They might try to explain it physiologically, for example: two rats like to touch each other because it is rewarding, so that is why they became friends."

We sat in silence for few minutes. So this was Husserl's great accomplishment. He maintained the credibility of natural science while unseating its sovereignty, replacing it on a level ground of authority with other fields of knowledge, and opening a new space for pluralism that escapes the scourge of relativism. But I still wondered: how does natural science—one particular derivative model of the world—then get reapplied back over all worlds?

"It is established as a priority over the lifeworld. What happens in natural science is 'really real' and what's in the lifeworld is not." Phenomenology reverses that, Giorgi explained. "Phenomenology says, 'No, the

primary thing is the *lifeworld*, and *science* is a derived world.' He stood up to end our meeting. "Let me put it this way," he said. "We're beings in the world. 'World' means everything. It means nature, humans, consciousness—anything you can find there. How do we get nature? World minus all consciousness, all subjectivity, gives you physical nature. Well, then how are you going to go from physical nature back to subjectivity, when you have removed subjectivity? But that's exactly what psychology [conceived as a natural science] is trying to do. They're saying subjectivity is a being of *nature*. No, subjectivity is a being in the world. You need *worldness*, which means consciousness, spirituality, morality, values—and whatever else you want to have—because the whole shebang is there in 'world.' The initial situation is *world*, not nature."

That afternoon on the long drive home from my meeting with Giorgi, I was thinking over what he had said about how the logic and conventions of science sometimes get applied to areas of the lifeworld in ways that are inappropriate. And I fell into a Husserl-inspired domino swoop of backward-step thinking. When it started, I was recalling the problem I had brought to Giorgi—how Buddhism is getting read through a scientific worldview in its transmission to the West. Then I remembered how when I returned from Nepal I was seeking to confirm a Buddhist worldview within a Western one; and it occurred to me now to wonder whether reading Buddhism through a scientific lens might not be another way of trying to do the same thing. The only alternative to seeking confirmation of one worldview within another seemed be to try to find common ground between them. But this approach, too, felt similar—it wanted to get both sides into accord, to end up with them standing on the same ground. All these approaches dead-end for different reasons, I noted, but they all feel unsatisfactory in the same sort of way. What was it that felt off? For many miles, my mind spun around in circles. When I

arrived home, I sat in the car for a while in the driveway, still mulling the problem over.

Gradually it dawned on me: *all of these approaches try to sort out who is right*.

Once I saw that, I could take another thinking-step backward. I asked myself, why do we assume that coming up with a single right answer is what counts as an adequate solution to the problem of navigating different worldviews?

Perhaps the reason is that we take for granted that the question "What does it mean to navigate different points of view successfully?" is a *scientific* one. In natural science, what counts as navigating different points of view successfully is figuring out which one is correct. (If you have multiple answers to the same scientific question, you don't call it a solution; you call it a paradox.) But in the *human* realm, navigating difference successfully isn't about getting the correct answer, as anyone who has ever "won the argument but lost the friendship" knows.

And then I recalled Geertz's statement about what it was that anthropologists do, and I finally understood what he meant when he said that navigating different points of view is not a matter of objective study, but a matter of interpreting meaning. This mistake is such a familiar one that it had been hard for me to see, even when Geertz had pointed it out so clearly. It is a mistake I make in everyday life, for example, in my interactions with my partner. Oftentimes when our points of view differ, I fall into one-correct-answer thinking: *She's got it wrong.* But predictably, from her point of view the problem is on *my* side. At those moments of one-correct-answer thinking, it is very difficult to see how incompatible points of view can be reconciled. But when we talk further and she shows me how she arrived at her standpoint, I may see how it makes sense, given her background. To get to that understanding, I need to reflect

on my own assumptions: What was I taking for granted that made her position a problem? The moment I see the nature and source of our difference, the tension dissipates. Her point of view opens a new possibility for me. My world gets bigger.

If navigating the confrontation of Western modernity with Buddhism is a different kind of problem than we previously imagined, it also requires different sorts of skills. Logical thinking might help us navigate the scientific sphere, for example, but it can't be what we rely on here because what counts as logical depends on the criteria of specialized worlds. (For example, in a traditional Buddhist world, it is entirely logical to use this life to prepare for the next one. In a materialist world in which there are no future lives, using this life to prepare for the next isn't bad logic; it is not logic at all.) What dialogue with tradition requires is *conversation skills*.

Navigating conversation successfully calls for showing up in our entirety and inviting our dialogue partner to do the same—which means putting background assumptions on the table. It calls for learning how to listen, which means allowing Buddhist tradition to speak from its own ground while we bracket our preconceptions, pay attention respectfully, and confirm that we understood accurately. Then it calls for knowing how to reflect on how what we've just heard jibes with our own sense of things. In this way, encountering the tradition can show us that what we are taking for granted may be very different. When those background differences light up, they become—in this context—not obstacles to understanding but the conditions of possibility for it; it is precisely because the modern Western and traditional Buddhist worldviews have very different background assumptions that they can illuminate each other. And once an assumption is illuminated as such, when we see it as one way—rather than *the* way—for things to be, then we are up to something

new: relinquishing certainties rather than confirming them. This is a way forward for Buddhism and modernity that isn't about sorting out who is right: both worlds meet each other in their entirety and are challenged, enriched, and expanded by what the German hermeneutic philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer called "a fusion of horizons."

Whereas any religion, like Buddhism, is about affirming *particular* meanings, human science is about understanding the background that makes any particular affirmation possible. So human science can shine a light on the particular ways in which any tradition, religious or secular, affirms meaning; it places them all in a radically new context not accounted for by their own self-understandings. It opens the way for individuals and communities to engage traditions in a dialogue that is both affirming and critical; and it opens those traditions to dialogue with other forms of knowledge.

In every age and culture, certain qualities emerge as especially esteemed virtues, while qualities that were once virtues no longer hold the same power or significance. Buddhism is not exempt from this process. In our global age of competing religions, incommensurate value systems, and widely divergent cultures all bumping up against one another, the capacity for sympathetic understanding might well emerge from being something barely mentioned in any tradition to being a primary virtue and a characteristic of a mature consciousness. This ability to relate to what is alien on its own terms and in its own framework—and to navigate a multiplicity of contexts with a kind of multilingual fluency—is consistent with a Buddhist outlook and with Buddhist values like compassion, sympathetic joy, dependent origination, and nonattachment to views. But there is something new about it as well, something that is called forth by the world we find ourselves in. It is both a demand and an opening.

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