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(The following is a series of dialogues between Samdhong Rinpoche and Donovan Roevert)

RELIGION

DR: Paleo-anthropologists generally hold that the earliest human religious beliefs and practices originated in the primal human need to make sense of the natural phenomena which on the one hand sustained and on the other often threatened their survival, and to gain a measure of control, however delusory, over these phenomena through the practice of certain rituals.

This theory implies that the development of religion was based on primitive fears associated with the struggles of this life and the mystery of death and the afterlife, rather than arising from the authentic sense of an internal or mentally latent spirituality.

Concurrent with these primal religious developments we find the rise of the shaman or priest in the social unit: the chosen one who could intervene with the spirit world on behalf of the community, and this system endured over long periods of our religious history, still surviving in some cultures today.

Much later, in the course of the last 2,500 years or so, a gradual "democratization of religion" began to spread. The result of this development is that every individual has direct access to the spiritual realm and to their particular deities, saviors, or prophets.

How does one explain this development? Is it the by-product of biological, social, and cultural evolution or is it an indication of a real gradual process of spiritual enlightenment of increasing numbers of people in the world?

RINPOCHE: Here again I would say that we need to define the meaning of religion and the meaning of the Buddhist term "Dharma," or the expression of these. I would use three different terms: religion (English word), spirituality (English word—particularly pertaining to Christianity), and then the Indian word "Dharma." These different words actually have different meanings but in our day-to-day communication these three words have become almost interchangeable in a kind of synonymity: religion, spirituality, Dharma.

As far as I understand it "religion" refers to a much wider scope and "spirituality" is narrower than that, and "Dharma" is much more precise. So these three things should actually not be intermingled.

Religion may embrace traditions, rites, and social customs; so, in this case, as you mentioned in your question, religions are gradually evolved with the social and economic development of human beings. I do not disagree with that. Fire worship, sun and moon worship, and so forth, and many other nature rituals: they might be evolved out of ignorance and out of fear and the desire to escape fear; and some priests and shamans become more influential and they institute certain practices. These are possibilities which I do not dispute. It may be true that this sort of religion evolved in that way, but I can't assert this absolutely. I can only say that there is a possibility that it may be true.

But coming to the tradition of spirituality and the tradition of Dharma, these are again not an evolution. They are revelations of teachings coming from a Higher One.

Therefore I always carefully define the word "tradition." An authentic tradition must have three attributes or qualities. First, it is taught or revealed by an authentic source or, we can loosely say, by a divine source. Second, it must be transmitted by means of an unbroken lineage from person to person. And third, it must be verifiable through common sense and self-knowledge. So if these three factors are present, then it is an authentic tradition. Otherwise a long perpetuated custom need not necessarily be a tradition.

For example, in Hindu society there is the concept of untouchability and concepts of different races and colors with religious significance, and this cannot be a spiritual tradition. These are perpetuated evil social customs which divide humanity and they have nothing to do with true religious tradition or spirituality or Dharma.

And I think this kind of thing is intermingled in most of the religious and spiritual schools. We have a pure tradition combined with so many impure customs and habits, so we need to differentiate them from what is valid.

Then coming to the Dharma: the Dharma was taught by an authentic person, that is, the Buddha. We consider that there are three valid reasons for the authenticity of the Dharma, and these correspond with the three Jewels of Refuge. First, the Buddha knows the Dharma fully and is therefore qualified to teach it. He is an indispens-

able Teacher and will not become dispensable in the future. Second, he taught the pure Dharma which can save you from misery and set you free from bondage; and therefore the Dharma is a real religion, like medicine, a valid remedy. And third, the Sangha goes with you to help you in your practice, the Sangha being the fellowship of Buddhist practitioners. So we consider that these three objects of refuge are necessary and indispensable to achieving the highest level of spiritual attainment: complete freedom from bondage.

So this is not a philosophical path or religious path influenced by human social development like other so-called primitive religions. Dharma was taught to us by the person who actually realized it. And that same Dharma was also practiced by many other people who would become the Sangha, people who have attained the spiritual achievements and who also testify that practice of Dharma dispels defilements and ignorance. They have experienced this for themselves.

So this is not an evolution of a tradition. It may be an evolution in the life of an individual: today you don't know the Dharma, tomorrow you hear the Dharma, and the day after tomorrow you practice the Dharma, and you gradually evolve your own spiritual life in that way. That may be an evolution but Buddhism itself is not part of evolution or driven by evolution.

Buddhism comes into being in the full manner in the Buddha's lifetime and then it begins gradually to decay. And now it is halfway on the road to disappearing. So it is not evolved, but comes to us in completeness. So we shall have to differentiate in this way between evolved religion and non-evolved Dharma.

DR: Why must Buddhism decay? Why is this inevitable? Why can't the Dharma always remain with us in its complete or full form?

RINPOCHE: Here we also need to differentiate carefully. What is Buddhadharma? The Dharma is defined as the wisdom-realization and the canon. The Buddhadharma is Truth in the form of canon and of wisdom-realization, and Wisdom which has been awakened in the individual mind can never decay. The Buddhadharma is undecayable once the Arya Mark, once the Enlightened Path has grown into one's mind. It will grow up to the realization of the Buddha Nature and it will never decay.

But the duration of the Shakyamuni Dharma in the world is described as 5,000 years, but what does this mean? It means that the teaching and the continuity of the tradition and lineage will eventually disappear, and that this will be due to the mental conditioning of people.

People will become less and less qualified to receive the teaching afresh. The formal teachings will always be preserved and they are not going to decay, but the effectiveness will decay because persons qualified to receive the teachings of the Buddha Shakyamuni afresh will become fewer and fewer. Their ability to understand penetratively will decay as time passes, as socio-economic values and conditions deteriorate, and people's interest in Dharma lessens.

Therefore attaining new Enlightenment through the words of the Shakyamuni Buddha will come to an end. It is natural decay and I don't think it is possible that we will always have people qualified to receive the transmission. That comes to an end with a span of time.

Therefore we consider that in this eon there will be 1,000 Buddhas of whom four have already appeared. Some of these Buddhas' teaching remained only during the lifetime of the Teacher and soon afterwards it disappeared. And some of the Buddhas' teachings might last a year or so. But the teaching of the Buddha Shakyamuni is able to endure for 5,000 years because of the temporal conditions on this earth and because of the disposition of the people.

This is very evident to all of us and to our teachers who see that the establishment and acceptance of Dharma is continuously lessening with every generation and this, I think, is the nature of decay, and nobody can stop it.

DR: But the Truth always remains. Some Buddha will arise in the future to reteach the Truth.

RINPOCHE: That's very true. That is the Buddhist way of seeing it today. As I mentioned, there will be 1,000 Buddhas before this earth is destroyed, and the Shakyamuni Buddha is the fourth. There were three who preceded him and their Dharma has disappeared, and then the fourth Buddha has reproclaimed that Dharma. Thereafter the fifth Buddha will come into this world; that is, the Buddha Maitreya—and so forth. So—decay and remanifestation. It is like the law of nature: constructing, destroying, constructing.

MORALITY

DR: Bearing in mind the early or primitive social development of humanity we can postulate that morality arose as the result of an evolutionary pressure based on the human need to bond and cooperate in order to survive, and on its function as a mechanism for ensuring acceptance and security at both the individual and the social level.

But as the initially small social structures expanded into tribal units and nations the ties of blood and personal friendship became thinner, and although bonding imperatives remained central, new room was made for selective and advantageous bonds, giving rise to allegiances and conspiracies. The need then arose for moral rules which would prevent betrayal. Overshadowing and underpinning all these survivalist and pragmatic mores were the rules or moral laws transmitted in the religions of various social groups.

In the individual context we can argue that the more abstract and subtle, less biologically and socially driven moral imperatives, evolve together with our evolving ability to reason and to perceive and understand our own psychological pressures such as guilt, depression, and anxiety.

The morality we encounter in the modern world reflects all these aspects together with other refinements such as the code of chivalry, the notion of duty, the financial rewards of the pragmatic ethos, and so forth.

But are there deeper wellsprings of morality which remain largely unexpressed in modern individual and social conduct? And, if so, why is this the case? And, what are these wellsprings?

RINPOCHE: In Buddhist terminology we talk about virtuous and non-virtuous deeds, Kushala and Akushala Karma, and the word "morality" is not very popular in the Buddhist canon.

Nevertheless, the seed of virtuous conduct (Shila) is required for one's own development and also for the establishment of social harmony. The need for virtuous conduct extends to both poles. The development of morality cannot be based only on the premise that it is a social necessity. It is even more necessary for the proper development of the individual. That is the Buddhist viewpoint.

As I mentioned, Buddhists talk about virtuous and non-virtuous conduct or right and wrong conduct. To refrain from direct or indirect

harming of others is right conduct, and to indulge in an act which directly or indirectly harms others is wrong conduct. So this is a very clear definition of right and wrong: it is violent or it is non-violent.

Firstly, it is a fact that nobody wants suffering: every sentient being looks for happiness or peace. A person of higher attainment may not be looking for pleasure or happiness, but still wants peace and tranquility. Pleasure, happiness, and peace are wanted by every sentient being, and nobody wants pain and misery.

So there is this equality of all sentient beings. This equality lies in the fact that one does not want to get hurt and seeks ways to protect oneself from being hurt. The only sure way to protect oneself from getting hurt is to refrain from hurting others. So, from a very "selfish" viewpoint, if you do not want to get hurt, then refrain from hurting others. This is a sufficient argument for non-violence at a lower level.

The second argument or reason is that you and the other are equal: therefore you have no right to hurt the other. And if you hurt the other, the other will feel miserable just as you feel miserable yourself when you are hurt. Therefore you must respect the other as a sentient being completely equal to you. This is the argument at the medium level and it is based on an inner recognition of the truth of equality of sentient beings rather than only on the "selfish" advantages of harmlessness.

The third and higher category of response is that you must save or rescue others because you have the insight, the capability, and the responsibility. You are more enlightened than the other; you know your responsibility towards sentient beings and you know your universal responsibility as a human being. Therefore you must not only refrain from harming others, but you must also benefit them.

Therefore the basis of morality comes from these three arguments for harmlessness. Now there can be exceptions to everything, but by and large these should be the criteria for deciding what is moral and what is immoral.

And then there are many other things which are moral or immoral at the gross level or in a lesser dimension. These are dependent on social and cultural background. For instance, in Tibetan culture a particular word may not be considered harsh or impolite, but in other cultures it is regarded as impolite. So the question of politeness is related to morality, but this is not defined by certain spiritual, inner reasonings. It is defined by the cultural custom.

In Tibet, whenever we met someone we used to ask, "How old are you?," and this was considered very polite, but in the West, particularly in the case of a lady [a wry smile] . . . asking her age is considered very impolite. So this kind of morality differs from culture to culture and from custom to custom.

SPIRITUALITY

DR: Some people assert that the spiritual growth of humanity is driven by the evolutionary pressures of biological, cultural, and social development. They argue that our spiritual paths and experiences are simply the function of evolved neurological processes, social conditioning, and cultural inheritance. In neuropsychological terms our spiritual tendencies can be interpreted as the result of an increased imaginative capacity and an evolved ability to project our inner anxieties and desire for acceptance as a "spiritual goal"—that is, a projection of a "spiritual path" or "spiritual being" which can free us from these inner sufferings.

If we speak about an ontological spirituality, an Absolute Truth about reality and about ourselves which exists before the dynamics of evolutionary pressure (and which, in that case, would be the principle responsible for all aspects of our evolution), why is it so hidden from our sight? Why do we need to discover and nurture it rather than simply finding ourselves at home in it as our natural medium of being? Why does the course of our evolution in all its aspects seem actually to be in conflict with our spiritual tendencies and beliefs?

RINPOCHE: Here I would completely disagree with the formulation of your question. Spirituality is not evolved through the social and biological evolution of humankind. Spirituality is always there. Spiritual evolution or growth can be spoken about in the case of an individual's life or mind, but there is no evolution of spirituality as part of the wider processes of evolution; quite unlike the evolution of religious customs or religious rituals, spirituality did not evolve by means of biological evolution or social conditions. It has nothing to do with that.

The mind is by nature clear and there is no dirt in it or dirt in its nature; that nature of mind is completely pure and completely clear.

But it has for centuries and centuries been conditioned by external defilements.

[At this point Rinpoche snatches up an official looking document from his desk and rolls it up into a tight cylinder] If I roll it up tightly for quite some time, then it becomes conditioned in this way. [The tightly rolled paper cylinder lies on the desk] Then I cannot put it straight like this. . . [Rinpoche spreads the cylinder flat on the desk, but it curls itself up again]. It will always go back. . . [Now semi-rolled up]. You have to apply pressure. . . [Continues to spread out the cylindrical document which stubbornly continues to revert to its cylindrical shape]. It will go back. This is like the conditioning of our minds.

For so many countless births and rebirths we have been completely conditioned. Therefore, in spite of the fact that the nature of mind is clear, in spite of the fact that the nature of this piece of paper is flat, it has been conditioned and that conditioning needs to be removed. [Here Rinpoche rolls the paper cylinder back on itself, in reverse] And sometimes it has to be reconditioned in the reverse way to make it straight again. So it is true that spirituality gradually evolves in the individual mind but it is not evolved in the biological world, either by biological or social evolution.

The rediscovery of the mind's original nature is considered to be the state of Enlightenment, and that state of Enlightenment is, I think, common to most of the spiritual traditions, but the methods and language differ from each other. The methods also do not differ very much, but the basic differences are in the expression and the language.

Appendix: An extract from Samdhong Rinpoche's address delivered at the 73rd Annual Meeting of the Association of Indian Universities in December 1998.

. . . The modern idea of a university is primarily functional-pluralistic. Its first and foremost function today is to impart job-orientated higher education to the students. . . . This function is also oriented toward technological advancement as well as towards the function of educating and training young people for various jobs required by the technological-industrial-political-bureaucratic establishment. . . .

In terms of its telos, a university in its true sense does not see itself and its grand unique vocation in terms of supplying high level per-

sonnel to the governments and managerial or technological manpower to the industrial and business houses. A university qua university is the home of the intellectual. It is the shrine of wisdom: it is the guardian of human intellectuality, yes, guardian of the universe. . . .

According to the traditional perspective education is the most important means for dispelling ignorance. Here ignorance means the proclivity of human mind to follow the easiest way of seeing and accepting the world at its face value and its failure to distinguish between appearance and reality. Once a person's perspective is awakened through proper education or through intellectual intuition he/she can see the fallacy underlying the world in its formal appearances. The awakening of perception enables one to know the truth.

The knowledge of the Truth leads to freedom from all bondage and limitation. To know is to be delivered. The great selfless and wise teachers at whose feet persons like myself were educated in Tibet often used to remind us that five benefits accrue from learning: knowing the truth and getting acquainted with things unknown, developing proper understanding of the things known, dispelling unwholesome or erroneous views and clearing doubts, developing right view or right perspective that enables one to see reality, cultivation of intellect leading to the illumination or liberation of mind. . . .

Under the present dispensation one of the primary functions of education, i.e. shaping good human beings, has no place in the list of priorities. . . . Is it not our sacred duty as teachers and educationists? If a radical change in the ways of thinking is brought about, right actions can flow out, both individually and collectively. Unless a wholesome social and cultural milieu is created one cannot hope to bring about any meaningful change in our education system.

SCIENCE

DR: Primitive "science" rested on the mystical interpretation of nature, including the belief that the universe and its phenomena were mysteriously controlled by a myriad spirit beings.

Later, rational and sometimes irrational theorizing was applied to our interpretation of material processes. These theories were often derived from unquestioned final authorities such as Aristotle or fol-

lowed quasi-mystical routes such as in the case of the alchemical quest.

Gradually, speculative and eccentric theorizing was brought under the constraints of the scientific method, the interplay of hypothesis and repeated experiment, and the notions of predictability, falsification, and so forth.

With Isaac Newton came the age of the mathematical formulation of physics and the scientific philosophy of determinism, which in its turn was upset by Einstein's theories of relativity and the increasingly "uncertain" theories of the new physics.

Today the new physics has opened up a whole realm of uncertainties and fundamental doubts about the true nature of our perceived reality, doubts and disparities which dog the physicists' search for the Grand Unified Theory of Everything.

What can modern science learn from spirituality?

RINPOCHE: I do agree that science is an evolving discipline, driven and directed by evolution, and these evolutionary forces are very closely related with the evolution of socio-economic structures as well. And this evolutionary process is relatively young; perhaps 500 or 1000 years. And this evolution has now reached—I don't know—the highest or rather the most critical level.

People have discovered many things which the naked eye could not previously see or the ordinary mind previously understand. They have reached a critical level and that is why the uncertainty has markedly increased.

What does this mean? It means that whatever you have decided by these methods today may be proved wrong, and therefore you are uncertain at this level and you cannot escape from this field of uncertainty.

There is an ancient Indian school of philosophy which is part of Jainism and is called Shayatavada which means "perhaps": the "Philosophy of Perhaps." A thing may perhaps be square or it may be round or it may be a triangle—I can't decide. All the possibilities of definition remain. In terms of this philosophy the ordinary mind cannot reach the perfect reality: it is beyond the ordinary mind.

And I think that modern scientists are more capable than before and are developing an insight into the Absolute Reality. His Holiness the Dalai Lama has had many dialogues with leading modern scien-

tists as a result of which many books have been published. But these "dialogues" have in fact remained a kind of monologue—they are not really dialogues between spirituality and science in the truest sense.

I think the possibility is there: scientists can learn a great deal from spirituality. Mainly they can learn that they should know the limitations of the ordinary mind. They should give up their scientific arrogance; they should give up this arrogance of science and accept that the ordinary mind cannot attain to Absolute Truth. They should accept that the ordinary human mind is limited, and if they cannot merely accept this they should resort to experiment as they do in other cases.

They should practice meditation for two or three years to improve their minds and then come back to their laboratories and discover how differently they might understand things. The possibility of the development of human mind and the impossibility of seeing the ultimate by the ordinary human mind: these two things they must learn from the spiritual tradition.

And here I remember that Acharya Vinoba Bhave always said that, while science is developing, spirituality is already fully there, and once the two meet, that will be the day when humanity will have a new spiritual revival. And perhaps that will happen.

ART

DR: Primitive art is considered to have had an exclusively religious or magical function in terms of which spirit beings or natural forces could be influenced by the creation of effigies and other artistic depictions of survivalist activities whose outcome was believed to be determined by these spirits or forces.

Such artistic depictions (such as cave paintings) were contrived in order to ensure a certain result, such as the success of a hunting expedition or a good harvest. From the point of view of the artists or shamans who created these works of art, they played a functional and determinist role in the survival of the group.

In later development art began to take on many other functions. For instance, it might function to preserve the magnificence of a given ruler for posterity, to depict gods and goddesses, to tell the tale of mythical and real historical exploits, and so forth. Yet for a long time

it preserved its largely religious role, providing tangible and visible symbols for objects of worship. It also had a didactic and "reminding" function. This functional aspect of art continues to this day.

Gradually, and much later, the development of secular art began to overshadow religious art in effort and importance as well as in experimental technique, and eventually became an end in itself: art for art's sake, where the main aspect reflected is the human condition and the ideas associated with the human condition at a particular time.

Modern art, beginning with the Renaissance, where religious art was chiefly used to decorate and magnify the religious institutions which commissioned it, became increasingly and finally almost exclusively humanistic and anthropocentric.

In its modern development it became more abstract and less associated with the perpetuation of tradition and as a result became also more obscure. We all know how hard it is to fathom much of modern art, and there is a great deal of cynicism and even open ridicule directed at it.

One of the legitimate functions of art in all its genres is to reflect the human mind and its perceptions of life, its understanding of meaning, and so forth. It has been argued that modern and, more particularly, postmodern art reflects the slide of humanity into meaninglessness and absurdity. Life can have no meaning or purpose or destiny other than that which the individual decides to ascribe to it, if any. We are all free to formulate our own truth or to express our own delusion as truth.

In this progression modern art presents us with a very important warning. How can we as individuals and as societies counter this gradual decline into meaninglessness and how can the arts be helpful in this endeavor?

RINPOCHE: I don't know how to answer this question. It is a very profound question and I don't know much about art. Here again, I do understand the notion of the evolution of secular art, artists becoming more proficient and improving their use of color and so forth, which develops together with biological evolution as well as socio-economic development. So it evolved; that is for sure.

And secondly, how are we to demarcate the difference between what is religious and what is secular in art? In contemporary art we may be able to demarcate but, for instance, in the case of very old cave

paintings which we have rediscovered and of whose age we have some idea through carbon dating: how can we decide what the real intentions of the artists at that time were? Anthropologists have decided that their art must have been for this or that purpose.

I still remember a conference on yoga during which somebody was speaking on the evolution of yoga in primitive times, and he brought a picture of a human being sitting cross-legged with a pair of horns on his head, and he tried to prove by this means that the practice of yoga was present during those primitive times. But I don't think this picture necessarily represented yoga practice—it may have represented something entirely different.

What I mean is that we cannot decide the mind, motivation, and purpose of the artists at that time. The art is very old and the artist is no longer here. So in this way we make the statement that primitive art is more relevant to truth than modern art. In this we need to exercise caution.

And then coming back to religious art: religious art in the Buddhist tradition is not evolved. Buddhist religious art has not undergone processes of evolution. It is completely clear. For example, the mandala, the very complicated mandala, both mandala painting and construction of the most complex kind: neither are the result of the gradual evolution of art.

These were revealed by the Enlightened One: how to make it, how to measure it, and how to color it; all this was revealed at the moment of beginning and has its own significance.

For example, the making of a Buddha's image and the measurements are prescribed in the book of art, the book of making the Buddha's image, and that book is as old as the Buddhist literature, as old as the canon. During the Buddha's own time the measurements were already decided; they were not gradually evolved or handed down at a later stage. And these measurements are perfect for every human body and essentially you cannot find any fault in these measurements or dimensions.

If the scientists today were to examine these things, the measurements and instructions for drawing the human body in exact geometric proportions, they would have to say that it is very advanced and very "evolved" art. They would have to acknowledge it, but I don't think that anyone has yet examined it. So these are not the result

of artistic evolution. They existed in their present form from the time of the Buddha.

Then coming to modern art and postmodern art, I am not knowledgeable. But I don't know whether they show the manifoldness of human life or whether they try to condense this manifoldness. That also probably differs from artist to artist.

I met quite a famous modern artist a long time back and I asked him, "I do not understand anything of your art, and what is the meaning of modern art?" Walking along, we saw on the roadside a goat which was eating vegetable leaves, and he immediately told me that the intention of traditional art was to depict the goat, the leaves, and the eating—everything in totality—but that modern art only depicts the eating; neither goat nor leaves, but the action of eating is all that modern art attempts to depict.

It doesn't make any sense to me, although it may be true. I don't know: it may be an expression of "manylessness" or it may be an expression of something else. But an artist should not convey that life has no meaning.

I think that through the practice and appreciation of art a person could realize the manifoldness of life much more than others. This is my opinion although I do not claim to know. I cannot answer this question appropriately since I am not an expert in the arts.

"*The Long Road to Now*"

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