

## **Introduction**

Thank you for inviting me to speak. The organizers requested that contributors answer certain questions and I organized my presentation with that in mind. Let me introduce myself. American by birth, I did a degree in Philosophy at the University of Chicago, followed by research at Oxford and then a doctorate in law at the first faculty of law in the U.S. Later, I did an advanced diploma in Political Science at L'Institute des Hautes Etudes Internationales at the University of Geneva. I discovered Buddhism during a stay in Japan and studied the ancient texts for more than twenty years, finally attaining the promised understanding.

After being confirmed by the greatest Zen Master in China, I became his disciple in 1994. I was ordained as a Nun in 1999 (the bi-millennium of Buddhism in China), then declared a Zen Master and professor of Buddhist doctrine last year.

At present, I am teaching in Geneva and during the summer retreats, in China. These retreats are free of charge and open to outsiders.

## **My Philosophical Journey**

As you know, our theme is "origins and identity" and also the sources of our points of view and our basic values.

We come into the world with some predispositions. As any mother can tell you, children in the same family can be very different in their reactions to the world. My own predispositions were primarily: curiosity and skepticism (example: *The Island*)

I quickly noticed, however, that curiosity that is unfocused leads directly to frustration, so I decided to concentrate on three questions:

1. The origins, evolution and destiny of the cosmos;
2. The organization, functioning and objectives of human society; ours in particular;
3. The nature of our psychic experiences: our feelings, emotions and thoughts.

It was only much later that I learned that these questions corresponded to the Chinese search for the three harmonies: 1<sup>st</sup>, Taoism, for harmony with nature; 2<sup>nd</sup>, Confucianism, for harmony in society; and 3<sup>rd</sup>, Buddhism, for harmony with ourselves.

In my attempts to resolve these problems, my skepticism pointed me towards philosophy: courageous, non-polemic, disinterested and beyond time; and to science because, science must justify these theses by precise measurements made in the real world. These are the tools of my research.

I believe that philosophy and science are complementary and do not conflict with one another. Greek philosophers and scientists were one

and the same. Up to the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, scientific instruments were even called "philosophical instruments".

### **My Philosophical and Scientific Explorations**

In light of the preceding, I have chosen materialism over metaphysics, science over religion, and reason over faith. During my studies at University, I preferred the following:

**Aristotle** over **Plato** because concepts do not exist independently of the objects that give rise to them.

**Marcus Aurelius**, for his commitment in the world.

**Seneca**, for his skepticism and self discipline.

**Abelard**, for his insistence that belief must be based on understanding.

Even though modern philosophy started with **Descartes**, I wasn't convinced (along with many others) by his "I think therefore I am".

On the other hand **Baruch Spinoza** truly liberated philosophy from its Middle Ages constraints. I'm always surprised to note how similar his opinions are to Buddhism.

**David Hume** was the first Westerner to practice scientific introspection. He concluded that the self did not exist. Exactly the Buddhist point of view.

**Arthur Schopenhauer** adopted Buddhism outright but misunderstood it.

**Marx** and his idea that the human consciousness is simply the result of the human brain reaching a certain level of complexity.

**William James** for his pragmatic definition of truth as something with wordly consequences; and his proposal that the mind is simply a manifestation of the body.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, I feel that I am the heir of Bertrand Russell, the atheist, and of **Ludwig Wittgenstein** and his ideas that the problems of philosophy are, for the most part, those of language. We must be able to point at what we speak of; and finally that we shouldn't speak of things we know nothing of.

Among contemporary philosophers, I feel close to **Daniel Dennett**, with his idea of the absence of a free will (his arguments, but not his conclusions).

Obviously, I am closer to the empirical British philosophers than to the continental ones, perhaps because of my "Anglo-Saxon" education (I discovered I was Anglo-Saxon when I arrived in a Francophone country!)

But one must be careful. To be sincerely searching for the truth may have dangerous consequences, even today. If you want an easy life, you'd better forget it.

## **My Meeting With Buddhism**

My philosophical and scientific searching led me to a convergence, (not a conversion!), with the Buddhism I discovered in Japan. In particular it's proposition of a leap of reason towards belief based on experience rather than on faith.

After these events, which showed me the failing of my religious orientation, I decided to study Buddhism intensively, with the result which I have already indicated. If you want to follow my example, I recommend the following works:

The Buddhism of the Buddha by Alexandria David Neal

Chan (Zen) Texts and Commentaries

The Diamond Sutra

The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch

Zen Flesh Zen Bones

I advise you to stay away from gurus and be careful of translations of oriental texts because they are almost always a distortion of the teaching.

Today we talk a lot about globalization and it is a fact in the areas of industry, commerce, finance, technology, transport and communication.

It is a challenge for our generation to create a global village based on culture and religion. For us Buddhists you have perfectly the right to do self service in these areas.

Only place your confidence in your own experience. Be careful about speculation. Insist on proof of every thesis.

I have exposed the source of my values, the elements of my education (both formal and informal) as well as my objectives, which were to respond to certain important and fundamental questions using philosophy science and Buddhism. Now you have the right to answers which this process has produced.

## **Our, Or My Origins**

Because we have no example of a rupture in the chain of causation, but only the evolution of phenomena, Buddhism supposes that our cosmos, or its antecedents, have always existed. From the process of its evolution, only the chain of causation, without intervention of an ego is at the origin of each event or phenomenon.

Although it may seem that existence is preferred to non existence (the famous question of Leibnitz), life is preferred to inanimate things, and intelligent life to other forms. These facts do not require that the intervention of an ego has produced them.

To be a human being is a great gift, and each one of us must accept the challenge and take advantage as much as possible of the opportunities that life offers us. Our origins present aspects which are

all at once collective and individual, racial and cultural. We know now that we are only one human race but also that each one of us is unique thanks to our DNA.

The culture which we have always considered to be our own, has depended on the distance over which contacts with others have been possible. Today, communication and contact are possible at the planetary level. We have the possibility, and even the obligation, to create a new society based on peace, liberty and the respect of the cultural heritage of each one of us. All of these values are our European heritage from Hellenistic civilization.

Today, we have the right to demand as our heritage, the best of what humanity has created throughout the world. We have much to learn from others.

### **Identity**

If it is true that our society has rights with regard to us, it is also true that we have the right to a space as large as possible (in accord with the legitimate demands of the society) in which we can construct our own identity.

It seems to me a grave error to confuse "Who are we?" with "Who am I?".

It's quite common today to criticize individualism. I don't agree with this. If it is true that the citizen must obey laws and demonstrate responsibility in his interactions with others, these others have no right to impose their cultural choice in the name of their need to confirm their choice.

It is not an excessive individualism that is at the origin of the violent conflicts of the twentieth century, but rather excessive totalitarian collectivism.

We each have the right to create our own identity.

Societies which are at the same time multicultural and peaceful have existed and exist today, and we can follow their example.

Only individuals can defend their rights against totalitarian systems. Government always overestimates its need to control the individual as is the case in the United States today. George W. Bush, used the word "liberty" twenty seven times in his inaugural address but, largely because of him, his country has never been so far from this ideal.

The greatest periods of humanity have been those with the greatest individual liberty.

For us Buddhists, the fundamental identity of each human is his Buddha nature. You are all Buddhists in the process of discovering this fact. Once you have discovered this fact, you escape from suffering and you find your place in harmony with the 10,000 things (a Chinese expression meaning the infinity of things).

## **Ethnics and Morals**

The role played by ethics and morals in Buddhism is very different than that which it plays in other systems. If it is true that there is the eight full path for beginners, that path is not an end in itself, but only an expedient. The true objective, is the fundamental transformation of the individual into a Buddha, in other words, into a being that is moral by definition because of a total lack of egocentric considerations. Such a being always acts in conformity with perfect ethical considerations.

In view of the bankruptcy of ethical systems based on the proposal of rules, such an approach appears to us to be the only practical alternative. The problem is not to know what is correct (except perhaps in certain cases of bioethics) but to motivate people to act in accordance with what is correct. Our answer is the transformation of the manner in which we see the world.

## **Utopias**

For Buddhism, the project is to discover the nature of the world as it is, and not to invent a world as we would wish it to be. Despite this fact, this discovery, which implies the discovery of our Buddha nature, will create for the individual viewing the world in this new manner, a utopia. For him, each event will be considered as necessary, and from that fact, beyond any judgment of value. In other words, a Buddha is in this world *and* a utopia at the same time. This is the meaning of "Nirvana". The world of samsara, the world of others, and that of Nirvana are the same world. As beauty is in eye of the beholder, Nirvana is in the view of the world of a Buddha.

For Buddhists, the way toward Utopia is the same as the way toward a moral life, in the transformation of the individual. The pacifist nature of

traditionally Buddhist societies gives us an example of the success of this approach.

## **The Gods**

The organizers have asked that each speaker talk about the gods. Their existence, or non existence, is without a doubt, the principle question of metaphysics. Personally, I systematically refuse discussions on this point, but in view of this request, and as a conforming guest, I will present my point of view, which is also that of Zen Buddhism.

As always in philosophy, we must know what we are talking about. To what God or Gods does this question refer? I suppose the reference here is to Jehovah (the God of the Jews) called God the Father by Christians and Allah by Muslims, but permit me to note in passing that these three religions inspired by the Jews are not the only monotheisms. For example, the Zoroastrians believe in one God, Mazda, the American Indians believe in the Great Spirit, and in

antiquity the Egyptians believed during a certain period in the Sun God Amman Rah. It is perfectly possible for each of the seven billion human beings on the earth today to believe in one God, but each in a different God ... a sort of religious tower of Babel. It is not a question here of whether to believe or not to believe (for example, I am a believer, but I believe in the teaching of the Buddha) but in *what* we believe. Buddhism is not inclined toward metaphysical speculation. These questions are of course interesting, but not susceptible of a solution.

The Buddha chose to remain silent when asked fourteen metaphysical questions, probably out of respect for sensitivities. Nevertheless, it is clear that such beliefs are incompatible with his teaching. A creator (God) is excluded by the fact that the chain of causation is never broken. His teaching excludes all possibility of a transcendental being (nothing is permanent, everything is subject to change). Finally, the intervention in the world of such a being (miracles) are also excluded as a rupture in the causal sequence. If it is true that the Buddha spoke about Gods, these Gods were considered inferior to men because they totally lacked all motivation to become Buddhas.

Finally, permit me to add my proper reflections. Even if Gods exist, it is not evident that we should adore them or even collaborate with them. It is a real possibility that they are evil. As the Hebrew text tells us, their God is jealous, vindictive, and unjust (examples, he sends rain for the fields of the just and the unjust, and also the story of Jobe). How can we reconcile a just God in a world in which dishonesty and violence are so frequently rewarded. In view of the violence caused by believers, perhaps the Gods are evil. Perhaps, like Prometheus, we should resist their domination. Much of human progress has resulted.

### **Contemplate, observe and criticize *or* change the world.**

Marx tells us that we should change the world. Einstein remarked, along with many others, that there is a regrettable tendency for good people to prolong their contemplations, observations and criticisms during which time evil people have already acted and that from this state of affairs, the world is dominated by evil. For me, there is a time for contemplation, observation and criticism but also a time to act. Ideally, no action without reflection, but also not wasting time on reflection without action. Otherwise, metaphysics becomes interesting only as an intellectual game. Today, how many committees are constituted without the least intention of following their own recommendations? How many laws are passed without the least intention of applying them.

Someone has said that societies develop in three stages. The first stage is that of founding acts (frequently heroic acts). The second is an epoch of great works of art that tell us about these acts. Finally, the third stage in which museums and libraries are created to display these works. It seems to me that we are in the third stage.

At my age, I have acquired the right to contemplate, observe and criticize but it is still my responsibility to act.

### **Conclusions**

By my philosophical and scientific investigations, I have rediscovered the truth of the Buddhist teaching. In following these teachings we can liberate the energy which we otherwise waste in creating an illusory world. For Zen, the engagement starts in the circumstances of our daily lives and all practice of the Buddhist religion results in the application of the knowledge acquired from this practice in this same daily life. The liberation from the individual suffering and the energy released can, at the level of an entire society, permit a new departure and a future more promising than now appears possible. Thank you for your attention. I look forward to your questions.