



THE AJARN AND THE ARTIST
A discussion of Buddhism and related issues

by
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“He who travels far will often see things
Far removed from what he believed was truth.
When he talks about it in the fields at home,
He is often accused of lying,
For the obdurate people will not believe
What they do not see and distinctly feel.
Inexperience will give little credence to his song.”

Hermann Hesse “The Journey to the East”

Preface

This book began as a series of e-mail exchanges between myself and a senior Buddhist monk, Ajarn (Ajarn or Ajahn means teacher), whom I met in Bangkok, Thailand, at the World Fellowship of Buddhists. He had been ordained for over 16 years, was fluent in English and Pali, and welcomed my letters discussing Buddhist ideas. This exchange proceeded for a period of 5 years. Like many I had come to Buddhism (and to study in Asia) after feeling estranged from the contemporary Judeo-Christain and Islamic traditions in Western countries. I wanted to rid myself of what I perceived as “supernatural nonsense” entirely based on unsubstantiated hearsay reports, with widespread antagonism between sects and their conflicting claims to supremacy. All this with threats both here and now and to come, with intransigent beliefs at odds with modern science and finally offering a “pie in the sky when you die” afterlife if you'll only see it my way because “my Guy is better than that other one's Guy.”

Our historical time is witnessing an unprecedented global trans-national and trans-cultural assimilation. The disruptions and accommodations necessitated by a worldwide market/workplace and human diaspora are most critical for religious values and beliefs. Most notable is the clash between an “evangelical rogue superpower” and a “worldwide cult of brainwashed religious zealots.” This World War IV (the Cold War was WWII) will determine the fate of civilization in our century. In essence it is a “Battle of Fat Black Books”...technological megaprowess versus suicidal terror. Democratic freedoms “warts and all” versus abject servitude to a severe and intransigent Theocracy.

It is my hope that this book and its informal discussion, both common sense and theoretical, shall encourage debate and serious commitment to resolving the final and most destructively separative of human endeavors... fundamentalist religious faiths. I am indebted to Buddhism and Ajarn in particular for providing a framework to my own nominal “secular, scientific, spirituality” to which I allude in these e-mail pages and in a final conclusion at the end. In the best sense of Buddhism I call upon any interested party to be a “BIO BODHISATTVA”.

Richard Artrichard
Bangkok, Thailand, Vesak, 2007

Dear Richard

Your letter was forwarded to me here. Yes, I would be happy to correspond with you. The e-mail connection here is good, so it's a convenient way to communicate. If you have any photos of paintings you have done, which you would care to share with me, then I would enjoy looking at them. The graphics on this old laptop aren't good enough, but you could send them by post to the address below.

Wishing you well,
Ajarn



Dear Ajarn,

Thank you for your response and interest in corresponding. Please excuse my late reply as I've been traveling outside Thailand and preparing for an exhibition of new paintings opening in Phuket next Saturday 21 Sept. I'll send you regular mail an announcement for the above as well as a few brochures from previous publicities. The major themes of my serious work are in a very modernist mode. There are many terms for this style, but put simply it is a tradition of painting more than the eye can see. In contemporary circles the idea or concept in the art work can be just as important as the look or technique involved. The old pictures classically functioned as a window on the world, now the "high art" in a sense is a window on the mind. In any event the work must be new or different in some way from what has been done before, building upon the styles past. (of course I do scenics, seascapes and

portraits as subjects for easier sales)

In referring above to the window on the mind, I would like to open our “conversation” by that topic---the mind. I just bought a cheap SW radio with 7 bands and it's really amazing the reception I can get. BBC. VOA, India, Japan, Russia, Philippines, Australia, even West Africa, etc. Just turning that dial back and forth is a conceptual voyage across the earth. I think about those airwaves (vibrations) carrying voices everywhere, unseen, all around us all the time.

I read a good book about the Abhidhamma published in Colombo, Sri Lanka. I have referred to that book to several lecturers at World Fellowship of Buddhists (WFB) Sunday talks. There seems to be a great deal of conjecture about the philosophy therein and a theorized four things eternal and infinite-time, space, matter and mind. Furthermore the only difference between matter and mind is that a unit [sic] of mind does not combine with any other unit of mind or matter, whereas matter freely combines with other units of matter. Thus in the human body there is one unit of mind and billions of units of matter.

I am well aware that this issue opens a philosophical can o worms. I had a few philosophy courses, some at graduate level. I consume the latest research in neurobiology (there's a fine new book out, I skimmed it, called “why God won't go away” by two neuroscientists.)

Is the mind the same as the soul? Does the mind live on especially strong in those who have exercised it? Are we surrounded by units of mind like those SW broadcasts? Is

the brain, as hypothesized in the above book, an elaborate symphony of sensations straining to realize a state of AUB (absolute unitary being)?

Ajarn, I hope I haven't freaked you out... I'm just interested in the big issues. I think of myself as a kind of monk, a postmodern one somewhat lewd in a friendly way, a rogie yogi, maybe what Rajneesh called Zorba the Buddha.

best regards,
Richard



Dear Richard,

As you will be opening the exhibition in Phuket tomorrow, you may not get this for several days yet. Anyway, to briefly respond to your last e-mail. Yes, I can see that you are interested in the meta-questions, and I'm probably not the man to assist you with much clarity in that department. Life, this lifetime at least, seems to ask for grounding, and wresting, or dancing, with the coarse questions. You have probably learned enough about Buddhism that anatta - “not self”, one of the universal characteristics, means that there are no true “units”, of anything, mind or matter. To use the technical lingo, everything is in a process of change – a process of interrelated and interdependent causes and conditions. This flux, because it takes certain temporary shapes and forms, appears to all unenlightened beings as “things”, “persons”, “units”, whatever. This refutes any notion of a soul. As for the mind, it is considered to be made up of feeling, perception, mental

formations (including thoughts) and consciousness. But even these mental qualities are not units they arise and pass away continually in such an inter-causal relationship.

Best Wishes,
Ajarn



Dear Ajarn,

Thank you for your continued correspondence. I got your first e-mail of the Nibbana chapter on the day of my opening in Phuket. I had to wait to get back to Bangkok to have it printed out, all 34 pages, so I could study it. I have trouble reading seriously on the computer. I'll respond to this below.

I'm in Bangkok for a few days and will come to WFB for your lecture, but will stay for only the first hour and half. I feel we can communicate better on the web, and gives time to think about questions and responses.

First about the exhibition. It was for the most part a manifestation of suffering from beginning to end. The transportation of the paintings, the hanging with special UV lighting, the publicity and reception, are all part of the art "game" I deplore. Plus showing new art in a beach town like Phuket would be like you giving a lecture on Buddhism in Monaco, French Riviera.

All I can say is I think I made some people think about the concepts involved, and maybe influence a few young artists to pursue further areas of art. I once asked a Thai art

Professor friend (PhD from Pratt Institute NYC) about why make art if its a defilement? He said something about the difference between lay activities and the monkshood. Also the art education is a kind of generosity to students to develop a sense of the beautiful, the history of the country, and to be creative individuals.

Also it is my understanding that Buddha images act as “reminders” of the dhamma. For myself this is an idea I work with in that my painting is part of my “practice” religiously. It is a way to analyze and conceptualize certain philosophies I may be studying. I sometimes refer to what I do as “frozen philosophy”. The Chinese call painting the highest, freest art, in which one is able to participate in the creation itself. Or the causes and effects themselves.

Regarding the first e-mail about mind and matter and infinity. I take fully your response that no unit of mind nor matter, being aggregates, could exist infinitely. I must have read that book wrong about 5 years ago. I sent a letter to the publisher in Sri Lanka for a listing of their publications to refer again to that source. As far as the unit goes, that could be another wording for aggregate...

The chapter “Life how might it be” is truly a detailed book and I'm in awe that you could be translating such a work. From or to Thai or Pali? It's the most thorough writing on Buddhism I've read. My favorite book is “Handbook for Mankind” by Buddhadasa, though Alan Watts is for me the best explicator of Buddhism and its sources, especially the Mahayana.

Most of my Buddhist study has been in Zen which followed many years of Yoga practice with visit to India.

So my orientation is decidedly with Mahayana. You probably know that Buddhism in China merged with Taoism to form Chan or Zen. The Chinese, being more practically minded than Indians, allow for “much” prohibited in Theravadin Buddhism. Many Zen priests are married, many imbibe rice wine, eat meat etc. The Dali Lama loves sirloin steaks, Tantrik Buddhists have a whole folklore of sex activities etc.

I fully agree with much of Buddhism, especially the “three universal characteristics” impermanence, suffering and no self. I just cannot believe in the rebirth idea as a consequence of kammic mind streams. I have a tape from Wat Mahathat describing the action of the “chitta” somehow searching and finding a fertile ovum in which to rebirth. This idea, though you have staked your whole life/career upon it, makes no sense to me. It is part of Buddhism totally different from the rest of the teachings which are demonstrable as one may come and see. It takes a blind leap of faith.

It seems so many people take these blind leaps, one wanting reincarnation, another resurrection, some both reincarnation and resurrection! All ready to defend their leaps to the death if necessary.

It's my thinking that because there are so many of these blind leaps kinds, that is evidence they are all wrong and nothing but wishful thinking. The principle in Philosophy known as Okkam's razor, says if there are many conflicting theories, slice them down to the simplest... “All that we are came out of other things previously existing in the universe and we will change to another part of that or another universe, on and on forever.” This is fully in

accord with Buddhas teachings, is it not, and demonstrable. The problem, as I see it, is thinking one is separate from everything around. As a Zen priest told me, “when you're looking at the world, you're looking at you”. Concentrate on life after birth, not life after death.

To me it seems there is no escape from suffering, though you can reduce it much by the practice Buddhism advocates. To exist as a living being involves suffering---the price a being pays to experience life. That experience wherein a part of the whole, a living being, a temporary aggregate, comes out to take a look at the world, is paid for by suffering. Can you deny that you have the same problems of aging as the layman? Arthritis, prostate problems, teeth falling out, loss of sight, other common suffering, even if one is in Nibbana? I listened to a Venerable old Bhikku on TV who had a distinct smokers cough. Can these one be in Nibbana smoking? I know what a craving that is! And unclean smelling like an ashtray.

To me life, as many other say, is a mystery, best lived simply with few desires, a life of doing things, learning things, and helping somehow all beings and all the earth. It seems the Buddhist lives to get out of life and wouldn't care if the entire earth disappeared!

That realm beyond name and form is indeed mysterious, and approaching it especially difficult for the body and involves tension and conflict..

That's enough for now, hope you stay with me.
Best regards
Richard

Dear Richard,

I'm glad that you could make it to the WFB meeting and had time to sit through the talk. Although I imagined you wincing at the references to rebirth and future lives. It is interesting to me that the concept of rebirth seems to you to not accord with reality as you experience it, nor with your understanding of Buddhism. I believe the concept ties in with some of the other ideas we have discussed, especially the relationship between body and mind. The law of cause and effect, and the composition, and disintegration, of the material world – earth, water, fire, air and space – is of course much easier to observe than mental elements. Our bodies are good examples – as you say they are composed of elements previously existing as something else, and at death disperse accordingly (perhaps there isn't even a single atom which we carry from birth to death – one would need to ask a biologist or chemist). It's also clear how the body, or some other material object, exists as a temporary unit, appearing as a relatively solid and stable form. We can inherit a silver ring at birth and pass it on to our grandchildren. There are natural laws which determine how such objects or units remain as a composition, or break apart.

Now the mind is much more difficult to observe. Although as a human being, the mind relies on a physical body in order to function, this does not mean that the mind is a physical or material process. Neurologists who seek to discover consciousness as some form of nerve impulse, from a Buddhist perspective would be chasing phantoms. Although mind and body are inter-dependent they are separate phenomena – they can never merge. This is perhaps what you were referring to in an earlier e-mail,

that a unit, or aggregate, of mind cannot combine with a unit of matter. You went on to say that a unit of mind cannot combine with another unit of mind. I reckon this is true. If you watched the movie 'The Little Buddha' you may have been perplexed as I was that a single being, or mind-aggregate, could take rebirth as three separate individuals. I have never come across anything resembling this in the Theravada scriptures the Tibetans perhaps have a different take.

The mind as you may have studied is composed of four different elements in Buddhism – feeling, apperception, volitional activities and consciousness. I have not studied in depth how these four interrelate in each mind moment. But ultimately, like materiality, they all exist as transitory flow – there is no “thing” there which exists eternally. They arise and cease in each moment. But also like material objects, they form a composition which can be distinguished from other mental “units”. So the mental process occurring in “Richard” can be distinguish from that in “Ajarn”. Generally speaking such a process cannot leave the body and go and settle in another. You and I can't simply swap bodies for awhile. There are incidents which I am not qualified yet to explain, for instance what is occurring in cases of telepathy or when a yogi enters a deep state of concentration as is able to “travel” to other realms of existence. However, if you can follow me that the mind-process is separate from and yet somehow connected to, or dependent upon, a body then it may help to explain rebirth. Just as the mind is dependant upon body, so too is the body dependant upon a mind. At death there is no longer a consciousness residing in the body – therefore the body begins to disintegrate and decompose. If buried it may take months or years to disappear. From

your hypothesis the mind-process would immediately dissipate, perhaps becoming the material for a new mind-process in a newly-conceived infant. That may be true. The way I understand the Buddhist teachings, however, is that the mind-process continues to function as a collectivity. Just as the laws of cause and effect enable us to store and recall memories, for example, so too are there laws which govern the nature of this continuing mental process. Again there may be discrepancies between the different Buddhist schools on how quickly the mind-process settles into another body (given that there still exist the requirements for rebirth, most fundamentally the craving for birth “bhava-tanha”). As for your point that this continuation is not demonstrable, there are numerous accounts, especially in Thailand and Sri Lanka of people who have vivid past-life experiences. Of course these accounts can be dismissed as mere fancy. If rebirth remains highly unlikely in your considerations then you may have to wait until the moment of your own death to see for yourself. You are correct that for most of us, myself included, accepting rebirth is a leap of faith. This particular leap I have never had trouble with, as for me it makes much sense and feels intuitively correct. But you are right that the focus of one's spiritual practice should be on the present life, or even the present moment.

Nirvana is the utter purification of the mental process. There is no longer any residue of greed, hatred and confusion. Or I would explain it as the end of duality within consciousness, the “thinking one is separate” that you referred to. Although the realization of Nirvana occurs while the mind-process resides within a separate body, once that body dies due to the stress inherent within materiality there is no longer any impetus for rebirth.

Rebirth implies a mind which still has some sense of being separate and wishing to maintain that separation. So fully enlightened beings will still experience the pain resulting from residing within a body till death, but there is no suffering in their mind. At death they will “enter” Nirvana, which is a state free from duality – in this sense, the world of duality as we know it does disappear.

In answer to your question, the work I'm doing is a translation from Thai into English, although there are many quotes from the Pali, which also need to be rendered into English. I don't know where you heard that art is a defilement – I for one would not agree with that. Bani Shorter, in her book 'Susceptible to the Sacred', writes in relation to this: “But no longer do we often associate art with sanctuary or link religion with artistry except if artists choose to represent religious subjects. Most artists speak of their calling as if it were simply demandingly hard work. They try to limit their comments to plausible and rational statements, being wary of sounding pedantic, arrogant or esoteric. But the value of art itself is not necessarily diminished by other and seemingly far-out interpretations. Associating it with the sacred reasserts a valid and ancient connection, tested historically and universally. The state of the artist who actively waits, alert to the unformed vision, is a state of readiness comparable to prayer, and by analogy the studio, no different from the sacred cell of a monk, can be a place set apart where one undergoes a creative inner process of anticipation, suffering, breakthrough and faith.”

Peace,
Ajarn

Dear Ajarn,

Thank you for the last response and your talk at WFB. I am enjoying these e-mail letters with you as it gives me intellectual and allows me to formalize my thinking about the issues which are so important to me. I hope you are getting something out of the same if only as a rehearsal for similar questions you may encounter at WFB in the future.

Please do not take offense to my questions or rebuttals. Gotama Buddha must have encountered the same kind of thing during those six years in the forest. I'm kind of a rogue yogi who has taken the outsider track, there must have been many of those kinds found in the forest.

I believe Buddhism itself is a form of Jnana (intellectual discrimination) yoga. Gotama Buddha was a yogi studying with several other ascetics of various persuasion. I read in some Buddhist text that there were something like 16 different ideas of God and 64 differing theories of the soul (atman) being tossed around amongst those seekers 25 centuries ago. Gotama was wise to toss them both out of his system.

The anatta doctrine was truly a controversial step, far more than the four noble truths, middle way, precepts, causation, etc., which had surely been promulgated by other in the forest. I can understand maybe why he took that position because he was a Kashistra and the Brahmins were abusing their prestige so the caste system became repugnant; being dependent upon the atman, that idea had to go. I had the good-bad fortune of sitting next to an obese Indian Hindu matron on a 12 hour bus trip. She treated me like some untouchable servant the whole time.

If all religions separate humans one from another, the caste system is the foulest representation of that.

To continue our friendly dialog (the Tibetans have a tradition of Dharma duel) I enjoyed your talk with the subject of “faith” or sattah. You have a way of bringing out nuance of things which impress me. Wish I could have stayed for your usual concluding Jataka story. Going over your last e-mail, printing it out as I've done with all of them, and spending some time thinking about the text. I was not wincing at references to rebirth. I believe in a sort of rebirth as I mentioned- a reunion and recombination of elements with the whole.

I do wince when I hear the word “enlightened beings”, a much abused overused almost oxymoronic word. I guess I've come in contact with so many who claimed such a state who after much investigation could not better my pet dog for righteousness. I'm more comfortable with “nice guy”, “good friend”, “honest man”.

Speaking of wincing, can you feel people wincing? I can, decidedly so, even at a distance and over the phone. I think its the only siddhi I've come in contact with. I have noticed with my hair long, almost to my waist, one becomes more sensitive. A sikh once told me the hair is an antenna, I think so. Is that one of the reasons Bhikkhus shave it off, to lessen the sensations? Also why does the Buddha always have long hair in top knot?

In your talk I liked the item about loving couples being re-born together. I want to know more about this; also it would make for a Richard Gere starring Hollywood blockbuster film. Excuse the humor, but that's also

something Religion needs more of. I know sardonic humor is found in the Zen and Hebrew traditions, but sadly lacking elsewhere. There's something to that saying "life (or religion) is too important to be taken seriously"

On the subject of rebirth of what we must call a "mind process" (which you have said is ultimately a proposition of ones faith) please allow me to say that this idea would have seemed reasonable 25 centuries ago. Scientific discoveries such as the age of the earth, the vastness of the universe, our revolving around the sun, human reproduction and genetics were all unknown or scantily hinted at.

We are what we are, each one of us, through the genetic combination of DNA passed on through over 4 billion years of living organic activity. We are end points of an individual genetic relay race branching out from those first cellular organisms, travelling through millions of life forms to compose the individual universe of which each human consists. Something from all those life forms exist within our individual genomes, however micro they may be, and the encoding of memory, experience (past lives) are there too. Some believe DNA itself is alive and intelligent and using humans and others to transfer it along.

To say as Buddhists and many others do that mind and body are inter-dependent but separate phenomena never merging is the classic dualism argument-mind v matter, soul v body, spirit v material. In philosophy its called the "Ghost in the machine" position. This belief has a multitude of subtheories and can never be properly proved or disproved.

The big problem with this idea (there are many) is how can something so different as the mind and the body if they are so different, really exist together and even transit from one body to another, as proposed in rebirth. Being different how can they interact? These are questions philosophers ask, religious acolytes say something like its beyond our understanding or 'man proposes, God disposes'.

Another thing I personally dislike is the assumption that Humans are having a monopoly on this mind ("soul-spirit) property. Where was this mind process during the 250 million years the dinosaurs were the dominant form of life? Did it just become important or of a certain payload a million years ago with homo erectus or what? There must be 6 billion mind precesses in the humans on earth today, where come the 3 billion more expected to be added in the next 50 years? Are they sucked up from chimpanzees? elephants? parrots? Sorry, more humor. Gotama would have laughed 25 centuries ago.

Our idea that humans are somehow on top of the heap is something I often mull over (have you read Whitman's "Leaves of Grass") The eminent Biologist Stephen Gould says Bacteria are the most successful life form on earth. Three quarters of all animal life on earth are winged insects. I watch birds and butterflies a lot at my jungle-hut studio. They think we humans are some kind of lumbering, earth-bound creature, overactive, loud, to be avoided at all costs. You know what cats think of humans...

It seems to me that for all the good things humans do, like walking the moon, heart surgery, atomic energy etc., there are a multitude of rotten things we do to neutralize the

above. Myself the outsider, I've my favorite list of the 10 stupidest things humans do. These are things which observed by someone from another planet would be found absurd. Things like being ashamed of our organs of reproduction, sucking on white tubes of poison, neck tourniquets, killing in the name of a personal God, etc, etc.

I've lived on a river in the rain forest for one year now. I meditate on how it must feel for a boulder to be caressed endlessly by the racing river, or the river itself to be crashing and flowing to the sea.

To think of the mind process as somehow special in humans and continuing to function as a "collectivity" at death, somehow motivating itself to find a freshly fertilized ovum to rebirth is an idea from 25 centuries ago. I have no faith in this, if I had my druthers I would take rebirth in paradise with family, friends, lovers and santa claus.

I have faith in the grandiose earth itself and the process of evolution which created the brain mind-process through billions of years of birth-death of organisms from the primal sense of touch. This is what science tells us and I find it intuitively correct.

We are a part of the whole, temporarily separated from it, to have a look around, a taste, a thought, a revelation, maybe pick up some of these SW "broadcasts" the universe has to offer, and then go back to the whole from which we came.

Discontinuous beings become continuous again, in re-integration with the whole, a re-combination, or better a

re-being. We become the infinity we had forgotten...

As with Nibbana this is a state of freedom from duality and, I should add, free of dualism.

Of course no one could “sell” a religion with a summon bonum like this, folks want to have a meaning for their sufferings, their wars, why they are here, the purpose of life, a payment for their prayers. As the song goes “I never promised you a rose garden” as the Zen roshi said “win some, lose a lot”.

I'll close this response from the wayward yogi with the issue of art being a defilement. It was my understanding from reading the dhamma that a sensuous image like art painting would lead to desire or lust and craving and the entire samsaric circle. Thus to be avoided as a defilement . This is by no means my idea though lots if not most of art is defiling in some way.

Also to be an artist one must expose oneself to feeling and sensing which by definition disrupt the path of purification on the mystic quest. It is a razors edge to walk working with the material world and the public while maintaining a high consciousness. I have a good quote from Ruskin about this attitude.

Duchamp said the artist must be an egoist in the grand manner, and the life of an artist is an ordination like for a monk, a lewd monk, Rabelaisian.

I agree with the above which may be called the Romantic tradition in art, most notably expressed by Rimbaud who called for the poet-artist to “make oneself a visionary”, “to

know every kind of suffering, every evil debasement, taste the quintessence of every sense, and thus he arrives at the unknown... even though crazed in the end and losing the understanding of his visions ...HE HAS SEEN THEM”.

I like what Ginsberg said that while doing the above, the poet-artist must not lose his anchor...that being meditation/yoga... a personal sense of re-ligion... re-connecting with the ultimate... and I would finally add, the will power of a junk-yard dog!

Until next time, keep doing your good work,
respectfully,
Richard



Dear Ajarn,

You didn't answer my last e-mail so I think I must have said things you didn't want to talk about. I think I underestimated the ferocious conservatism of Theravada. I'm sorry... I would like to continue my dialog, even if one-way. You can delete as unread, or block, or send the text to WBU for their scholarship. If you choose not to respond, I'll send the words to virtual space. I've decided to change my name herein to “temporary energized aggregated sensing entity” or for short “tease”. This tease would like to discuss Karma, dependent origination, chance, and sexuality in further letters.

In the last letter my talking a biocentric stance rather than anthropocentric may have been something too far out for any institutionalized religion. My sources are many

including Taoism, the early Upanishads, pagan systems like Druids, American Indians, Stoic philosophy, Whitman's poetry, the writing of Norman O. Brown and Georges Bataille, to name a few.

If it seemed like Tease was not showing Karuna (compassion) nor Metta (kindness) in my human critique, that may not be true. My experience has led me to those conclusions, and I probably exhibit more than average compassion and kindness, certainly more than those who talk about those qualities all the time, but when no one's looking, there's backbiting, pollution and envy.

I like very much the story of Bodhidharma, considered to be the one starting Chan (Zen) in China. When summoned to the Emperor's court and asked what was the essence of his teaching, he replied "vast emptiness...nothing holy". To this the Emperor demanded who was this ragtag monk to say such? Bodhidharma answered "I don't know".

Please let me cite three experiences which shaped my thought (added to the pre-med studies in university including embryology and comparative anatomy of the vertebrates).

Tease was a photographer in the Vietnam war. Besides the many pix of dead and twisted confused wounded, the most memorable picture made was of a group of Vietcong prisoners. The looks on their faces were extraordinary... puzzlement, fear, hatred, resolution to fate. The photo went out on wire services worldwide.

Tease went to visit Mother Theresa in Calcutta, India. Though she was not there at the time, they took me around

to look at the dead and dying being cared for. Then I was taken upstairs another building to the orphanage. Here was a long, shaded room with hundreds of malformed babies and infants, pinheads, hydrocephelus, all the Siamese types, etc. I was shaken and full of tears.

Tease was in Africa, hitch hiking on trucks through Uganda to Sudan. At one truck stop we ate canned food, biscuits, bits of candy. Starving children watched me at arms distance for the exact moment when I had my fill. Then in a frenzy twenty hands grabbed desperately for any morsel they could capture in their empty tin cans each held with dirty bony fingers...

War, pestilence, and famine. Tease saw them up close, cried for them then and now...

What a lead in to discussing Karma. It's another thing without a clear explanation. It's been called volitional action, or from the root word to come back. Some people mistakenly call it moral retribution or "what you sow you reap", the "wages of sin" etc.

What happened to those Vietcong prisoners, those pinheads, those starving kids?

until next time,

respectfully,
Tease



Dear Richard/tease,

Please excuse the long silence. My life has been uncharacteristically busy over the past six weeks. After fifteen years living the monastic life my body still hasn't adjusted to not eating in the evening. The result of this weak metabolism is that my internal thermostat is affected. Although most doctors eventually give up on me I'm presently seeing both a chiropractor and an acupuncturist. I'm especially impressed with the latter.. Finally, I put in many hours preparing for the talk at WFB, which was on Buddhist cosmology. In the end it wasn't an appropriate theme for a meditation workshop but at least I learned a lot for my own research.

To attend to your e-mail of last month: As I mentioned in the talk, faith for Buddhists must always be balanced with wisdom or discrimination. So although it is okay to believe in something that one hasn't yet proven for oneself, this belief must then be followed by investigation, so that particular truth can be realized. In other words faith should be accompanied by an open mind, a mind that allows for all possibilities until all doubt is dispelled. Such an attitude is appropriate in relation to the question of rebirth. As Ajahn Payutto says, "it is possible to prove the existence of heaven and hell as separate planes of consciousness in two ways: firstly, by developing psychic powers through concentration –a doorway open to only a limited number of people. (This power is called "dibba-cakkhu" - the divine eye, one kind of "super-knowledge" - The Buddha described it thus: 'suppose there were two hours with door and a man with good sight standing there between them saw people going in and coming out and passing to and fro. So too, with the divine eye, which is purified and

surpasses the human, I see beings passing away and reappearing, inferior and superior, fair and ugly, fortunate and unfortunate') The second way is to die, which he points out none of us are willing to do merely for this experiment. But no matter – we'll all have the opportunity before long. So at the moment of your death you may have time to recall this e-mail correspondence and vow to accept what comes with an open mind. I recently read a book by Ajahn Payutto where he quotes that the mind is 17 times quicker than materiality, so that even if one dies instantly, in an accident for example, there is time for a process of life-review, or flashback, to occur.

As for your point that it is highly unlikely that two utterly distinct phenomena – mind and matter, would not only interact but be interdependent, I cannot at this time elaborate more although I wish to explore this theme in more depth. I'm sure that it is discussed in the commentaries. As an aside, you may be aware of the four most refined planes of existence in Buddhist cosmology – the Formless Realms, where Brahma Gods are born only as mind without a body. They include the realms of infinite space, infinite consciousness, 'nothingness', and 'neither-perception-nor-nonperception'. If I locate more material on this subject in the future I will let you know.

Related topics, since you mention DNA, are morphology and mental attributes considered to be passed down genetically. Although many physical qualities are more or less fixed (i.e., color of skin, hair and eyes), I imagine that it comes across as random to most scientists why some children are born physically attractive, intelligent, of kind disposition, or otherwise. Genetics then becomes a matter of statistics.

As for your comment about humans having some monopoly over the mind process, this is not a Buddhist concept. Surely you have heard of the teaching that one can be reborn as an animal (or as a god, ghost or hell being.) Not only are there uncountable beings when different dimensions / planes of consciousness are taken into account, there is also a sutta which describes different universes (the extent to which light can reach) existing simultaneously. The Buddha claimed that he could cast his aura or radiance through the most vast of these world-systems, comprising of a billion universes. With this multi-dimensionality both vertically and horizontally there is no fear of an exhaustion of beings.

The human realm is considered the most auspicious not because we are generally superior to other beings but because we have the ideal mixture of pleasure and pain along with the mental faculties enabling us to reflect on spiritual matters. The opportunity for spiritual growth and realization is most conducive under these circumstances. At the WFB meeting we discussed the question of evolution, if animals and humans are considered as abiding in distinct planes of consciousness. As far as I know anthropologists are still puzzled about the missing link between apes and the first Homo sapiens. (This came up in regards to the current cult that believes that humans were cloned by aliens).

I don't know where your perception comes from that Buddhists are a bunch of desensitized ascetics. As I said earlier wisdom arises because of pleasure and pain. I like to think of a wise being as someone whose heart is so expansive that he or she is able to thoroughly feel all of life's pleasure and pain without being shaken. One of the

definitions of compassion is being able to share the suffering of another and then try one's best to alleviate it. At the end of this path, however, one is not crazed and meaning is fulfilled.

As for your most recent e-mail, in which you introduce the topic of karma, I don't understand your question, 'what happened to those Vietcong prisoners, those pinheads, those starved kids?' Perhaps you can rephrase the question or clarify what aspect of karma you wish to discuss.

Sincerely,
Ajarn



Dear Ajarn,

Thanks for last response. I was surprised to hear you have an ailment, because you and your voice seemed so healthful. "Tease" always recommends yoga asanas for everything as well as the liver flush-garlic, lemon juice and olive oil. That made me think of the giant Emporium building next to WFB. Do you know on the fourth floor is the finest bookstore in Thailand? (Kinokuniya). Watch out for the fifth floor, that's the food court, the finest gourmet selection in Thailand. Liberated yogis like Tease go there for salmon sushi, a double whopper, tofu and guacamole.

I would also like to reiterate that I like most of Buddhism, agreeing with probably 50% of its teachings. That's easily twice as much as any other religious system, especially the "desert religions". So if it seems I'm too critical, I'm just trying to separate out what I can abide by and what I can

live without. I'm reading / studying other philosophy systems such as Chinese, Theosophy, Tantrik, etc. as well. It seems I have been studying the “skin” of Buddhism while you have done intensive “surgery” of its innards. I hope to achieve for myself, “Tease”, a purely Modern Mysticism of Secular Scientific Spirituality.

That said, I've been rereading some of my source books on the time of Gotama Buddha in India. During that period men were widely engaged in spiritual matters to an extent comparably seen nowadays in men blathering about different ball-games (also an item on teases' 10 stupidest things humans do). Tease saw remnants of these men in Bodhgaya, Varanasi, and most notably in Rishikesh in the Himalayas. Groups gathered around a guru in various kinds of dress and adornments. traveling and lecturing by oral persuasion. I read that Buddha lectured thus for 45 years, truly an amazing accomplishment. Unfortunately, his teachings were not written down, and translated from I presume Sanskrit to Pali, for fully 200 or 300 years after his passing. That is a very, very long time. Compare this to Jesus who, (although there is no record of his existence in the Roman or Hebrew histories of State) ministered for three years and the first writings of him appeared 30 to 60 years after his supposed (unverified) life. In that relatively short time period we know the differences which developed concerning his life and sayings (John being so different from the other three Gospels, and the Gospel of Thomas so different it was eliminated). So Tease is trying to say that it is as others have written, impossible to fully know what Buddha said originally. I read one source which says he acknowledged other worlds, gods, demons and the superhuman. Then I read another source which says he did not try to explain Nibbana, and for rebirth only

showed the candle flame passing to another candle, and didn't talk about it. Another source says he only discussed how to end suffering and discounted any supernatural things as not contributing to salvation (enlightenment). Tease kind of sides with the latter view because we know that Gotama Buddha was of the Kashitra ruling/warrior caste and he is credited along with Jainism as initiating a philosophical re-examination of Brahmanism, its caste system and the decadence of the Brahmins. To do this he would have to adopt a no nonsense, come and see for yourself, logical positivist attitude. Thus to eliminate ritual, the supernatural, the personal atman, and the deification of certain people. You know that world “deify” to make Godlike. That's what humans have done with Buddha who never claimed to be a prophet or god but that his salvation was available to anyone. All the other religions have done the same, each claiming that their particular “guy” is the best and ready to die for that. Tease has talked to many of these types at tea break at WFB. They consider Buddha an avatar or a prophet leading to a higher prophet (theirs), I avoid tea-break now...

Tease is currently reading a book by Buddhadasa on Dependent Origination. A difficult subject, but called the essence of Buddha's teaching. Buddhadasa attacks the interpretation of this subject given by Buddhagosa 1,000 years ago. Accusing him of eternalism and completely wrong. Even in the Theravada tradition there is profound disagreement today. I want to study the book more before I can discuss Karma.

Back to rebirth... in my opinion Buddha was agnostic about this (only the candle) and all the other trimmings were added later. Please confirm for me the story of

Buddhas last words. He picked up one empty bowl and placed it upon another empty bowl and said “all component things must dissolve” then passed into Nibbana.

In your last e-mail the balance of wisdom with faith was I'm afraid something the Kalammas would have whined at and maybe thrown a few stones. That rebirth cannot be proven with philosophical reason, scientific principles, nor common sense, but only through the supernatural divine eye of the illuminated elect, is with all respects, untenable. If there were some consensus among these divine elect it might be proof... but sadly there is none, only widely differing experiences. One talks to God, another an angel, another becomes God, etc. The other proof, “you'll see when you die” sounds like a bible thumper in the park. Again there are widely differing reports from the near dead (who were not really dead). You and Tease will become something else, “all component parts...” For Tease dead (Teased) I'll be either reborn or re-somethinged, probably a notch down (not too far) or... and this is a big “or”, during that panoramic review as my brain fades out like a TV screen in the dark, I hope I can think or mumble, “thank you Universe, here I come back again, it's been very sweet and I lived it to the hilt...”

Respectfully
Tease



Dear Ajarn,

It's been three months since last e-mail, you didn't respond. Has your health improved? Are you leaving Thailand? Or have my letters gotten to be too much? I've been reading very much and working on a new series of paintings. Talking with a Thai Art professor about my Buddhist researches, he called me a "postmodern monk". I kind of like that since postmodern has been defined as eclectic, affirming the unknowable, Kantian in the sense that things are relative to one's culture and particular sensorium, I might even say a globalization of the consciousness. Once again, the "temporary energized aggregated sensing entity" tease moves along. I've reread two books which supply most all the comments in my last letter. One, the "Buddhist writings of Lafcadio Hearn", an American writer who lived in Japan around 1900, and containing some of the most lucid and early explications of Mahayana concepts to English readers. The introduction by Kenneth Rexroth outlines the history of Buddhism and to which I referred in my recent letters. The other book, "If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him" by Sheldon Kopp . The title refers to a Zen Koan of the same words, and admonishes one to claim responsibility oneself for all that is real. Gods, gurus, ghosts of the past are of no use to the mature individual, only the shallow "true believer". Though the book is about the pilgrimage of psychotherapy patients, it could also be a speech to the Kalammas in its practicality.

I have mentioned these materials to back up some of the statements I made in the last letter. I don't know if you were offended by a capsule critique of Buddhist history, but I've talked to a few Thais, PhD's and plain folk, who

go bananas at the thought that Gotama Buddha was a yogi, not a Brahmin, etc. At least they don't condemn me to death for heresy like some "religions".

I've read Buddhadasa's book on "dependent origination" and I'm trying to unravel the differing thoughts pertaining to the idea of "KARMA". It seems, as with Nibbana and rebirth, there are conflicting and confusing statements. Since the three, nibbana-rebirth-karma, are so connected, even being the core of Buddhism, I'm seeking clarification. Thousands of years ago wise men tried to account for the apparent differences in their fellow folk. Why some strong or intelligent, some sickly or feeble minded etc. In referring to a previous letter – the VC prisoners, the pinheads, and the starving kids. Why do good things happen to some, bad things to others? If a successful hunt, the end of drought, a victory in war, or the birth of a male heir could be the result of intervention with a higher power, why not the above differences in people?

Somehow (and it could make sense those days) it must have been one's actions good or bad which caused the results seen in the present circumstances. AND THE SAME WISE MEN KNEW WHAT A NICE WAY TO MAKE PEOPLE BEHAVE THIS IDEA WOULD BECOME. Just follow the rules (of a particular culture), and give me my ten percent, and you will do OK.

Now this is the idea of karma as resulting from merit or sin in one's actions in past lives. The "desert religions" would say "as ye sow, so ye shall reap" (in paradise or hell). I've heard this theory espoused in the most grandiose proportions to account for everything that happens- plane

crash victims, the Holocaust, Shuttle disaster, divorce, on and on and on. It's the reason one may become an artist, a mechanic, a hoodlum, a saint. Everything happens through cause and effect, even what is called an accident has a cause, albeit an unexpected cause. Yet it does not necessarily follow that things are without considerable randomness or any form of just-unjust redemption. In fact the modern secular viewpoint is that it is a random world to which we bring meaning and an unjust world to which we bring goodness.

I write things down. There are 6 billion humans on earth, each carrying 60,000 genes, each gene has 3 billion DNA units. THEREIN LIE OUR PAST LIVES AND ACTIONS. We carry something from the beginning (maybe before the beginning) of all life on earth. We are temporal individuals composed of a multiplicity of inherited fragments of past lives. One may say the world or the cosmos is Karma.

In my reading of Buddhadasa's comments on karma, he seems to deny any eternalist ideas of karma, saying ones actions or sense contacts bring rebirth only if done so mindlessly, that is with forced volition. Actions are only affecting this life, in this six-foot body. Alan Watts referred to karma as accruing from conditioned (unspontaneous) actions in this life alone. Thus to be spontaneous without trying to be so, does not bring karma.

Ajarn, would you please comment with some input.
Thanks,
Tease Richard



Dear Richard,

I feel that my feet have finally landed on the ground. It's 8:15 pm and the sun is at the horizon. I wish to attend to some of your questions before my life becomes more busy with moving to the new monastery where I will be spending the next year.

You often quote the Kalama Sutta. How closely have you read this sutta? Perhaps I can remind you of clauses 5-8 in the list of items that the Buddha presents as inadequate grounds for belief:

- 5) Do not go by logical reasoning
- 6) Do not go by inferential reasoning
- 7) Do not go by reflection on reasons
- 8) Do not go by the acceptance of a view after pondering it

And later: “But when you know for yourselves, 'These things are unwholesome, these things are blamable; these things are censured by the wise; these things, if undertaken and practiced lead to harm and suffering', then you should abandon them.”

Likewise, from the Vinaya Pitaka: “The Dharma, which I have attained, is profound, difficult to see, difficult to realize, peaceful, excellent, not accessible by reasoning (not within the realm of reasoning), subtle, to be known by the wise”.

The reason that I have included these quote is not to dismiss the importance and value of the intellect. The reason is to point out that, in Buddhism, knowledge of the truth involves a going beyond the mental faculties that we

normally rely on. An acceptance of this already demands a leap of faith. If all but one in a million people were born blind, they would most likely reject the claims by that one individual that light and colors exist. But a few people, who because of a clearance of the obstructing film on their eyes began to dimly make out shades of light, would have faith in that person's words.

When you ask me questions, I am likely to answer from the Theravadan perspective. You probably know more about Mahayana Buddhism than I do. It will take me one lifetime to adequately attend to the abundant Theravada tradition. There is much debate amongst scholars as to the authenticity of Theravada. There are some obvious additions to what is considered to be the original words of the Buddha. I am perhaps conservative in believing that about 80-90% of the Sutta- and Vinaya-Pitikas are from the original sources. But even the additions for the most part are not contradictory. There is more confusing when one compares the many Buddhist schools, including Tibetan, Chinese and Japanese. You raise serious doubts about a tradition that was passed down orally for two or three centuries. Again, I don't have much doubt here in either the capability, or the respect for the original, of the monks of that time. There does seem to be a proliferation of commentary texts, but I don't sense large gaps where original teachings were discarded. In the end of course the authenticity will remain in large part unverifiable.

The Buddha's last words while lying in the Sala grove: "Now, monks, I declare to you: all conditioned things are of a nature to decay – strive on with heedfulness." I don't know where the empty bowls came from.

As for the Buddha's topknot, you may have to trace back Buddhist sculpture to see if it is included since the beginning. As far as I know the Buddha's topknot was only mentioned in later texts. The legend that I've heard is that after he cut his long, princely hair after leaving the palace, the hair curled into many small tufts, perhaps with a topknot, and it never grew again. It may be that the first sculptors of Buddha-images took this story and incorporated it into their work.

You made some inquiries about karma. You probably know that the word literally means 'action' or 'deed'. In Buddhism, and perhaps also Hinduism, however, it refers specifically to intentional actions and to actions performed by individuals who are not fully enlightened. This does not mean that karma is always bad, although perhaps karma is always tainted by some degree of greed, hatred and delusion. From what I remember, The Buddha warned his disciples to refrain from trying to unravel the complexity of karma and its results, as this attempt would lead to insanity. The aim of Buddhism is not to understand every detail and link of the karmic process, but rather to see patterns and to act accordingly. Most of this investigation does involve empiricism, although again there are aspects of the teachings that we may not be able to prove ourselves. One of the most important suttas, which describes the karmic law in a broader view, is the Cula-karma-vibhanga Sutta: The Shorter Exposition of Action. A Brahmin named Subha went to the Buddha and asked, "What is the cause and condition why human beings are seen to be inferior and superior? For people are seen to be short-lived and long-lived, sickly and healthy, ugly and beautiful, uninfluential and influential, poor and wealthy, low-born and high-born, stupid and wise."

The Buddha answered: “Beings are owners of their actions, heirs of their actions; they originate from their actions, are bound to their actions, have their actions as their refuge. It is action that distinguishes beings as inferior and superior.

“...Here, some man or woman kills living beings and is murderous, bloody-handed, given to blows and violence, merciless to living beings. Because of performing and undertaking such action, on the dissolution of the body, after death, he reappears in a state of deprivation, in an unhappy destination, in perdition, even in hell. But if on the dissolution of the body, after death, he does not reappear in a state of deprivation, in an unhappy destination, in hell, but instead comes back to the human state, then wherever he is reborn is short-lived. This is the way that leads to short life, namely, one kills beings and is murderous.

“...This is the way that leads to long life, namely, abandoning the killing of living beings...

“...This is the way that leads to sickness, namely, one is given to injuring beings with the hand, with a clod, with a stick, or with a knife.

“...This is the way that leads to ugliness, namely, one is of an angry and irritable character; even when criticized a little, he is offended, becomes angry, hostile, and resentful, and displays anger, hate, and bitterness.

“...This is the way that leads to being non influential, namely, one is envious, one who envies, resents, and begrudges the gains, honor, respect, reverence, salutations,

and veneration received by others.

“...This is the way that leads to poverty, namely one does not give gifts.

“...This is the way that leads to low birth, namely, one is obstinate and arrogant.”

I realize that this teaching, which includes the belief in rebirth, does not sit well with you. But to remove all references of rebirth and of other realms of existence from the Scriptures would basically leave us with a teaching that resembles some form of pop-psychology: Be a nice guy and have a good time and then die. It is true that one does not have to believe in rebirth before one can make use of the Buddhist teachings. From the Kalama Sutta:

“The first assurance he has won is this: 'If there is another world, and if good and bad deeds bear fruit and yield results, it is possible that with the breakup of the body, after death, I shall arise in a good destination, in a heavenly world.'

“The second assurance he has won is this: 'If there is no other world, and if good and bad deeds do not bear fruit and yield results, still right here, in this very life, I have happily, free of enmity and ill will.'”

If, as you posit, consciousness is some bizarre assemblage of chemicals and nervous impulses, all governed by DNA, then I imagine that you applaud the recent experiments in gene therapy and anti-depressant drugs. If we can only figure out the correct gene combination then we will be able to produce humans who have no sadness, fear, or selfishness, who are beautiful, healthy and wise. Is this

your dream?

You seem to be very skeptical of anyone who represents a religious institution, which I imagine includes myself. I realize that you wouldn't be conducting this exchange of ideas if you felt that you had already figured everything out. Bhikkhu Bodhi makes this comment about the Kalama Sutta: "This sutta is often described as 'the Buddha's charter of free inquiry', but while it certainly discourages blind belief, it does not quite advocate the supremacy of personal opinion in the spiritual domain. One important criterion for sound judgment the Buddha proposes is the opinion of the wise, and to apply this criterion implies that one is prepared to recognize other as wiser than oneself and to accept their recommendations in the confidence they will lead to one's long-range benefit."

In good faith,
Ajarn



NOTE

At this point in the discussion with the Buddhist monk there was introduced e-mail letters to and from an Italian friend Ben. It was felt that input from the Catholic tradition would serve to contrast Buddhist ideas and raise issues beyond the scope of the letters so far. These letters shall surface intermittently until the end of the book.

Caro Ben

Thanks for last e-mail. I have to type this since I'm away from computer and wanted to answer you soon. I'll be

traveling soon too. I'm unsure if we should continue our debate on religion. It could affect our friendship. At your suggestion, I have listed three books below which you may like to read. I considered the choice, and chose works by academics (Ph.D's) rather than really theoretical far out stuff which you may not be "ready" for.

Furthermore you say you have little time right now, and I have the feeling you did not read my last two response to you. I can see that you have changed your ideas about religion very much from those bachelor days. I'm well aware that any discussion I entertain with you now would not be only with BEN, but with a husband, father, member of two families, a church, and institutions? Nevertheless the subject is important to both of us, since I've studied most all the religions (and in situ) and you have become committed to one in particular which may dominate your life/worldview.

You ask what my religion is. I stated in a previous letter that I was writing a new religion, a "modern mysticism of secular scientific spirituality". I was raised as a Catholic, but it never felt right. Most of my mother's family today are Catholic and when my mother died, I made sure her rosary (which she said every night) was with her body upon cremation (she wanted to be cremated).

I also indicated in that letter my rather nasty criticism of fundamentalism. This is really important to me and a constant theme in my "philosophy" and "art". I see no greater danger in the world today than fundamentalist bigotry. If you analyze the greater sum of wars in the world today they stem from religions convictions above territorial, economic and population pressures. Though I

have severe reservations about the ideal of world peace and unity since it appears conflict-resolution-synthesis-creative growth is just a part of the “way” the universe works (to my thinking that is “God's” blessing since I've indicated to you the belief in God as the infinite, eternal ground of being). Suffering is the price we must pay for having the brief opportunity to live and have a “look see” at the universe. Perhaps while hoping for “world peace” one should be just as concerned with “personal peace (or contentment with the way things are)”. Without any doubt the best way to suffer the least in one's life and to know as much as humanly possible about “GOD” is to live with as much “goodness” as one is able to do (and that goodness includes other categories of moral worth like truth, beauty, faith, hope, charity, right livelihood work, love, etc.). And this goodness must be extended to not only fellow humans, but to realize a kinship with other living things, all the earth, all the universe. For we are “it” and it is “us”. This realization is the mystic “death”, for if you are the universe the “ego-self-personality-soul” is dissolved, there is no real beginning nor end, no up nor down, no inside nor outside, no separate me, nor separate God. Why?.....Why?.....Why?...just accept your life, enjoy it with as much goodness as possible, give thanks, then welcome reunion with source mentioned (the infinite eternal ground of being).

“Oh my God”, you say, what heresy, what depressive minimalism, what nihilism, what sacrilege, what blasphemy. BEN is not suffering, he has a book which explains it all better, if only others would see things the way he has been shown, his God is loving and merciful, and has promised paradise in heaven, and his God incarnated himself on earth to reveal Himself to humanity,

his book says so, and all you other schmucks are living in sin, if they would only see it “MY WAY”. At this point BEN my friend, pour yourself a glass of wine and relax in a comfortable chair, for after massaging you gently, now the gloves are off! BEN, my friend, you say it all boils down (was boiling a pun for burning someone?) to whether you believe God decided to reveal Himself to humanity or not. I'm sure the man/God you have in mind was the only such incarnation, and maybe you don't know that there were other claims of such incarnation before and after your particular man/God. Avatar is the word used for this. Even today there are claims of avatar (many are found in asylums worldwide). Of the several Avatar living today, which are genuine? Of those in the past which was the “True one”? Which one, where, when?...Why yours of course.

Maybe you are unaware that the particular claim for your man/God is only evidenced by the anecdotal accounts in the Gospels, since there is no mention whatsoever of that person in either the Roman or Hebrew histories of State. Maybe you are unaware that those anecdotal Gospels differ significantly in the claim (John contradicts the three synoptic others in making the claim that this was a God/man, and one Gospel, Thomas, was so radically different it was thrown out of the Church). Who knows how many books were thrown out? It boils down to a blind leap of faith (very blind). By the way, the claim of your God/man revelation is something Muslims find most repugnant, and bitterly oppose. You must know that religions are “cultural creations”, particular to one group here, another there. Conceptions of God have been many and varied... and this process is still evolving. Magic-animism-polytheism-monotheism-panentheism-emergent

evolution-humanism-I'm God -ism..... (no particular order here).

As I see it, there are three possibilities; All religions are valid (probably not, since they differ so widely, as say, Buddhism v. Islam or Christianity v. Taoism); All religions are invalid (a distinct possibility here unless they could eliminate their respective mythologies and find a common core); One or more religions are valid (logically incorrect since there are vast libraries for each religion with equally supported claims of revelation, or miracles and such).

Think of it... why would any true and loving God reveal itself to only one group of people, in one certain place, at one certain time and then have everyone slaughter themselves in the ensuing battle for hearts and souls? I'm afraid any rationale you or your particular ilk may have for this just doesn't hold water, especially boiling water.

Back to the boiling point... After reading your last e-mail, I immediately checked out and read a thick biography of C.S. Lewis. Sorry to tell you my friend, but for all his brilliant literary wit and teaching service, the man was a down and out tight-sphinctered Fundamentalist! I have characterized these types as the lowest forms of human life, and here repeat it. To paraphrase a recent political gaffe- Lewis would be well cast as Torquemada in a film about the Inquisition. Of course Riccardo would like to be cast as Giordano Bruno who, before actually being burnt at the stake, was given that merciful death without bloodletting the Church prescribed (strangulation). He died for "claiming the stars were other suns". Brother Leonardo was also called in for questioning and Galileo had to recant that there were moons on Jupiter! If I

couldn't play Bruno I'd like to play Anne Hutchinson (my ancestor hanged for heresy in Boston) in drag.

Beyond the non evidential, apparently false claims of religions, what God could allow such hideous tortures in its Name! "Remember the cruelties"... was the call of the Enlightenment in Europe. A "Church" that put to death and torture, I've seen estimated, 50 million people in three hundred years. Eyes gouged out, tongues cut off, skin flayed off, bodies drawn and quartered, burnt alive at the stake... What God could allow that and in its "NAME"!...read on please...

Of course that particular religion is not alone in its cruelties (even today there is the shameful behavior of its clergy and even more shameful attitude to birth and STD control in a world dangerously overpopulated). The believers who shoot up abortion clinics, beat up homosexuals, subjugate women, crash airliners into skyscrapers, and martyr themselves with explosive belts (they call it "the robe of heaven"), all do their deeds "IN THE NAME OF GOD!".

If the problem of evil and suffering (which only the well-fed, sheltered Bourgeois believers can rationalize away as their opportunity to make a better world or some such nicety) were not enough to dispel the concept of a personal, loving, God... then surely the atrocious actions of its many and varied acolytes.

What if you were one of the twisted-confused faces of soldiers dying I photographed in Vietnam...What if you were one of the long lines of malformed pinheads and other birth-defected I saw at Mother Theresa's orphanage

in Calcutta... what if you were one of the starving stick-figure kids watching me eat in Sudan, waiting for a morsel to snatch away in a frenzy of bony tiny hands???...
Tell them God loves you, it says so in my book, just have faith... Go ahead take that blind leap...

I want something more, equally as fulfilling, without someone telling me what to do with my own body, censoring my ideas, threats, damnations. Theology was once a subject of philosophy until the capacity for reason threatened institutional religions. Some think the very word Theology is an oxymoron since the study of God cannot finally be proved or disproved. How can you describe or give names of qualities to something beyond reason. Like it's said of the Tao-what is described as the Tao is not the true Tao (God).

You asked for some books;
Prof. Elaine Pagels "Beyond Belief" The Gospel of Thomas
Prof. Joseph Campbell "The Power of Myth"
Two Neuroscientists (names forgotten) "Why God won't go away"

I would also like to recommend solitary time...real solitary time. Think of it truly BEN (truly).. have you ever spent one entire single day without talking/listening to another human, either in person, on the phone, on TV, on radio, on computer..... be honest now... think!

Imagine what 40 days and nights must be like alone....

Take a walk ALONE in the dark forest, where there are no people nor trails... or maybe eat some mushrooms ALONE

in the big empty desert where there is only silence and the quiet inside...

To close, I hope I haven't offended you too much (I know you're offended some). I have enjoyed putting my thoughts on paper and this letter shall be a footnote in my collected dialog with the Buddhist monk. I have also "reduced" him to a position of "faith" and blind leaping. Philosophy is the art of creating concepts which must be defended, and being such, they often offend...

My friend, it is one of those strange ironic episodes in the inexplicable adventure of life that you, the esteemed social scientist from the university powerhouse of Biotechnology, should become party to hearsay, myth and the supernaturals; and I the barefoot, romantic vagabond, should espouse empirical science and holistic secularism. But I return your hug,

Ciao,,
Riccardo



Dear Ajarn,

Hello and hope this finds you well. It's been a bit over 6 months since our last communication. Do you miss Thailand? Are you coming back and when? Tease Richard has also moved back to Bangkok leaving my rain forest abode of over a year. I also traveled to the States and to Vietnam for which I am preparing a new painting exhibition. In the city I miss the sound of rushing water, the butterflies, and dancing bamboo groves, but not the

king cobras, scorpions and mosquitoes. My little studio apartment is in an all Thai neighborhood with a nice view of the Golden Mount Wat Saket and on my balcony I have a beautiful Bo tree. I love those trees, though I'm not sitting under this one, rather swaying from a hammock gazing at its heights. The birds love it too, I'm sure you know the ones-- a cooing dove; the big black bird with the whoo whoop that gets louder and faster; and some bird I call the rooster bird which lets out a screeching whistle at daybreak.

I have gone to a few WFB Sunday lectures, but miss your lucid talks full of insightful detail. This second Sunday WFB is starting lectures on the Abhidhamma which I plan to attend. As for our exchange of e-mails I had the thought that you may have given up on ol' Tease. Our exchange has become somewhat of a debate. I enjoy the stimulation and as before I thought the issues would be pertinent to your teaching of Buddhist doctrine.

My position has been somewhat that of a philosophy researcher rather than student of Buddhism, so that may be irritating to you. But you are now lecturing in the land of Hume, Russell, and Wittgenstein, so my questions may be useful. Please let me know if you wish to discontinue, just say you're too busy or such.

At this point I wish to emphasize how serious I have been because I HAVE PRINTED OUT EVERY SINGLE PAGE SENT AND RECEIVED TO/FROM YOU FROM THE BEGINNING. I have them here neatly arranged in stack about 3/4 inch thick. If you would like a copy made and sent to you, give me a snail-mail address. The good teacher is a good student.

I have to say again that I agree so much with Buddhism, but want to clarify areas which I may question. I know you say to have “faith” in the opinion of the wise and discount rationality, but I really want to “come and see”. In my opinion Buddhism is the only institutionalized “religion” which is worthy of thorough reflection though you know my emphasis has been on modern Zen.

As an aside, I was writing to an Italian friend who is a PhD Professor of Economics about the three universal characteristics annica, dukkha, anatta (impermanence, suffering, no self). He fired back a letter decrying such a “depressing, minimalist attitude”, since he was rediscovering his Catholic roots. Being as compassionate as possible, I debated his views and left him with the “blind leap of faith” which as I explained to him, was a similar position of a noted Buddhist teacher.

Before I get back to discussion of our last letter, the above aside reminds me of the question I asked at last Sunday's WFB lecture. Tease asked the ajarn since all things are impermanent and constantly changing why doesn't Buddhism itself abide by this after 25 centuries? He laughed, rather nervously, then went on to say how the four noble truths are forever in operation, etc. and really didn't answer the question. I could have cited several instances but deferred. I wanted to ask about a baby born deformed from a mother who took Thalidomide producing a defective gene and this was considered karma? I saw a Thai albino man yesterday. His karma caused this or a gene for albinism? Also arguing against the five precepts that orgasms are good for the prostate, wine good for the heart—read less suffering, etc.

It is my opinion that Buddhism's conception of rebirth to an eventual nibbanna cannot compete with the theistic religion's even more supernatural but more clearly articulated promise of a hereafter in heaven or paradise. Not that Buddhism cares about competing, but for it to grow, prosper and better the world it must align itself with scientific inquiry. Maybe make some subtle changes or clarifications and really be the practice of salvation from suffering it claims through personal effort and “come and see” knowledge.

Tease has been surfing the web quite a bit and spending time in the library. Three sites I recommend for anyone interested are [www.scientificpantheism](http://www.scientificpantheism.com); [www.posthumanism](http://www.posthumanism.com); and www.csicop.org. Information is the enemy of only weak positions of thought.

This leads to your calling attention to my skeptical stance towards religious institutions in the last e-letter. Yes I am skeptical because I see no greater impediment to the world's progress of integration (globalization). Though the religious quest is an important part of being human, there is no greater force causing separation of peoples. Beyond race, nationalism and unequal distribution of resources, religion will be the final hurdle to surmount. The worldwide (WW IV) fracas now ensuing between Jihad zealots and Crusader free-marketeers just may be the final act when the respective parties flex their big WMD muscles.

At this point I should remind you that Gotama Buddha himself was called the greatest skeptic of his day---a Hindu Kashistra caste nobleman denouncing the Brahmin priests, disavowing the Vedas, no belief in a creator God,

and eliminating an eternal atman (soul) and the caste system. A sadhu-yogi studying under many teachers in the forest for 6 years and like others doing same with long matted hair and an occasional whiff of sacred smoke. I read his life was threatened constantly for his skepticism. Removing references to supernatural unprovable ideas of rebirth, resurrection or other forms of metempsychosis do not, as you asserted, leave one with “pop-psychology (be a nice guy, have a good time, and then die)”. I believe humans are individual nerve fibers having the opportunity to glimpse and experience the totality of the world, doing things, learning things, enjoying things, and helping others to do the same, all the while maintaining mindfulness and compassion, then reuniting with the source of that abundant experience. That is enough to expect or long for in this life. WE ARE THE UNIVERSE OURSELVES (it's a YOUNIVERSE), all that was ever and will ever be. As human animal life, we had the illusion to be separate from the whole, all the time standing on it, eating and breathing it, and being eaten by it by legions of microscopic mites, bacilli, viruses, molds and such. We are unaware of the bombardment of multitudes of cosmic particles, gravitational forces, magnetic fields and other vibratory stimuli from other living things and maybe other universes inside/outside ours.

Far from mere pop psychology, these thoughts are akin to traditional Judaism, Taoism, Confucianism, Pantheism, and Humanism.

Most contemporary psychology I'm familiar with posits humans to be body-mind complexes, both “things” interacting. New thinking is that human consciousness is a continuous locus of body-mind-environment, all

interacting and contiguous. We are not separate from the environment.

I feel like I've said enough for now. Please comment if you feel to do so. There is a lot more to talk about and I respect your teachings, I hope you appreciate some mental jogging from a yogi on the edge.

Sincerely,
Tease Richard



Dear Richard,

Greetings. In answer to your question, I'm happy to continue our dialog if there are aspects of the Buddhist teaching for which you desire clarification. Your questions on the relationship of mind and body prompted me to examine this subject more closely, and helped rectify some of my own misunderstandings. Granted, I think that we come from different “worldviews” but that does not imply a lack of mutual respect.

Yes, I remember those birds well. The Thais onomatopoeically call the former a nok 'gah-wow,' and the latter a nok 'ga-poot,' perhaps because of its “poop, poop, poop” call. I don't miss Thailand, except in the Thai sense of 'kit teung' - I often think of the Thai people with kindness and gratitude. My next 'engagement' in Thailand is in May of 2005, but who knows, perhaps another invitation will emerge before then. (By the way, do the inverted commas appear normal on your screen? I remember in the past they appeared as gobbledygook.)

I'm now translating the final section of the chapter on the Three Characteristics, which if all goes well will be published in the middle of next year. My body still gives me hell – faulty genes or bad karma I do not know. A stroke of good fortune is that an expert at craniosacral therapy lives in this area and is offering his services out of the goodness of his heart. He says, don't despair – there is hope for me. Meanwhile, I count my blessings.

All the best,
Ajahn



Dear Ajarn,

Hello and forgive the three month lapse in communication. I was very busy with an exhibition of paintings which I put on in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. It was lots of work and some undue suffering, but worthwhile to further my art and right livelihood. I entitled the show “Virtues of Clouds and Water”, which I read were the virtues of the perfected Zen Buddhist (really Taoist inspired). Those virtues are “freedom, spontaneity, humility, persistence, adaptability.

The paintings were mostly done at my rain forest studio last year, now working on something completely different. I'm still in the Bangkok room with the Bo tree and view of Wat Saket. Really hot these days and I'm going away to avoid Songkran. I bought one of those Buddhist monk meditation umbrellas with netting and have comped a couple of times in it, once on a mountain lake and once at a beach. I found sleeping in it OK for the flying bugs but the crawling ones may enter even with a ground mat and

net tucked under. There are also problems with a driving rain and/or hard wind. When all is well, it's a terrific way to spend some quiet time with the 360 degree view and a round abode.

Do you have any interesting experience with this umbrella? Advice for users, etc.? How is everything in England? Any improvement with your physical problems? I saw a slide show about the murals at a Wat in Wimbledon, have you seen them? Very contemporized by some artists from Thailand visiting. Also, I saw in Vietnam a copy of a supposed portrait of Gotama Buddha, said to have been done originally by a monk, and the portrait presently in the collection of the British Museum. Have you heard of or seen this portrait?

Concerning my questions to you, I thought I had asked a few in the last letter, but maybe not direct enough. To make things clear I shall now place a Roman numeral like this (I) to indicate a question. Also from the wording of your last letter that you would continue dialog with "aspects of the Buddhist teaching for which you desire clarification" I hope does not mean that you would only quote from sources and not comment with your lucid commentary.

(I) Since you are completing a translation of the three characteristics, Anicca, Dukkha, Anatta, (the three of which I agree with) explain why if all things are impermanent, why doesn't Buddhist Dhamma itself undergo change? I came across a reference to the 3rd Buddhist Council during the reign of Asoka when the Tripitaka was codified almost 300 years after Gotama Buddha died. Then 50 years after Asoka's death began the

schisms of Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana. Who knows what could have happened to the original teachings? I still believe that the current conceptions of Kamma, Rebirth, and Nibbana were elaborated upon by those who followed Gotama Buddha. A yogic. practice (remember Gotama Buddha was not a Buddhist) to alleviate suffering through the Four Noble Truths was just not enough to offer converts to a new RELIGION. A religion now expanding from regional India to far beyond (to Greek Alexandria and then Rome by 100 C.E.).

(II) Concerning the above, I have mentioned in previous letters the doctrinal differences of Buddhadasa and Buddhaghosa with interpretations of Kamma or as I believe its called “dependent origination”. I still believe Kamma is only operable in this life, and then under distinct parameters, which I think is closer to Buddhadasa's interpretation. Do you have any comment on this apparently controversial subject which I have found to be, like rebirth and Nibbana, plagued by conflicting and confusing definitions. Furthermore, alluding to your last letter wherein you stated “my body still gives me hell-faulty genes or bad karma”... just what is the Buddhist position vis a vis genes and/or Karma? As I alluded in my letter, I saw a Thai albino man... genes or Karma?...

(III) Lastly, I have a question, again related to the above, regarding chance (unexpected) events. I once asked Ven. Sumedo a question at WFB (if you are close to him now he might remember) about the apparent random and unjust world which I believe to confront us as living beings. He didn't answer the question well (there was a very large audience) and I had to press him with the blunt question, “could you tell a Jew whose family had just been made

into soap that this was their Karma?" The audience groaned, he said that's not Karma, and I said well that's what most people, and many Buddhists think of as Karma. By then people were shaking their heads and gesturing and Sumedo responded with some rejoinder which effectively dodged the issue. I still think things happen randomly (though with a cause) and with few exceptions are decidedly unjust. Last week an asteroid big enough to wipe out a city just missed earth (another is out there somewhere on its way, and positive evidence shows a number of complete or partial extinctions of earth biota happened in the past). Also multitudes of Robber Baron industrialists, Mafia Dons, and War Criminals all live long, happy, healthy lives. Moreover, multitudes of wholesome, thoroughly good folk, just get all kinds of grief, murder, rape and disease rained upon them. Just what is the Buddhist position on chance events?

Well, these topics should get us back into discussion again, I hope I've been more clear with the questions...

Thanks, and best regards,

TEASE Richard



Greetings Richard,

Do not take my delay in responding as disinterest for your question. One of the reasons for the gap is that I have not previously delved deeply into the subjects you raise, at least not as a thorough investigation of the scriptural references.

You second two question are connected, focusing primarily on the teachings of karma. Normally, I answer question on karma very briefly, encouraging people to witness the law of cause and effect as it relates to spiritual matters in their own lives. In my own practice the simple teaching of “as one sows, so does one reap” has potency and gives me a principle by which to conduct my life. The question of one-life versus many lives is peripheral, although as I've told you the model of rebirth feels intuitively correct and allows me more expansiveness in how I view time and the relationship between the mind and the body. Another reason that I don't spend much time worrying about the intricacies of karma is heeding the Buddha's statement that the complex operations of karma are incomprehensible except to the vision and understanding of a Buddha. Unwise or excessive pondering over this complexity leads to “unhinging of the mind and disorganization of the personality”. If there is any subject for which we should keep things simple, this is it. You may know the Buddha's reply to the monk Malunkyaputta, who demanded that the Buddha answer a series of metaphysical questions: “It is as if a person were pierced by an arrow thickly smeared with poison and his friends and relatives were to procure a surgeon and then this person were to say – 'I will not have this arrow taken out until I have the details of the person by whom I was wounded, the nature of the arrow with which I was pierced, etc.' That person would die before this would ever be known to him”.

Having said that, I sense that you like to approach things from a philosophical standpoint, so I will add some explanations made by Buddhist scholars. But first to the first question:

I. If you look at Buddhism's history, I believe you will see how many changes have occurred. You mention the split into different schools already 300 years after the Buddha's death. These splits were not only on practical grounds but also on metaphysical ones. And these adaptation continue. A growing number of Western Buddhists, with Steven Batchelor as perhaps predominant, assert that the Buddha didn't actually teach rebirth as a fundamental truth. Pure Land Buddhists seem to believe in some heaven where all the previous Buddhas are waiting for us, and I understand some Tibetan Buddhists believe that fully enlightened beings sometimes choose to reincarnate. These are significant changes. We Theravadans, however, are the orthodox school, and adhere to a body of texts which are likely the oldest or most authentic (in the sense of having been originally spoken by the Buddha and his contemporary enlightened disciples). Part of our belief is that the Dharma the Buddha's teachings is svakkhato, one definition of which is that it's complete: not too much or too little. Furthermore, it's an open-handed teaching, not esoteric; we don't rely on later prophets or wisemen to interpret or embellish these teachings. As I've mentioned before, faith is a crucial part of the practice. Obviously if we deeply mistrust some aspect of the teaching, or it goes strongly against our intuitions, we may be less likely to keep an open mind. But if ninety percent of the teachings appear profound and revolutionary, and we begin to see results in following them, then this act of faith is easier. In the end of course we must go beyond belief and penetrate the truth for ourselves.

IIa As for the paticcasamuppada, you have chosen one of the most difficult teachings in Buddhism, and to give you a thorough reply to this question would take me another

year. When Ananda, the Buddha's cousin and attendant, who was a Stream-Enterer, claimed to grasp its meaning, the Buddha admonished him and said how abstruse it is. So there is no wonder that there are so many different and sometimes conflicting interpretations. The main debate seems to center around whether these 12 steps play out many times in every day or whether it takes three lifetimes for them to run full circle. Personally, I don't have a strong opinion on this matter as I haven't done enough research into the subject. I think it's possible that both views may be correct. Although cyclical, the Patic. usually begins with avijja, ignorance, as the 'root cause' or 'critical link'. Ignorance conditions sankhara, in this context meaning 'intention' or 'volitional formations'; intention is sometimes synonymously used for 'karma'. Ignorance clouds our judgment, leading us to act in unskillful ways. These tainted mental formations then distort consciousness, which in turn conditions 'nama-rupa' the mind-body complex. The remaining factors are the six sense bases, contact (cognition), feeling, craving, clinging, becoming, birth, and finally decay & death, with all their attendant misery. Those who believe in the three life theory, attribute the first two factors to past life cause, the next five to present life effects, the next three (craving, clinging & becoming) to present life causes, and the last two to future life effects. Those who hold the constantly repeating theory claim that there is a living and dying in every moment; if ignorance is present in the mind, we will cling to our sensual experience and create (become) an ego, which, having no stability, inevitably, leads to anguish.

One final point on this matter: The commentarial explanations for rebirth usually describe the mental “energy” (rather than a fixed soul or consciousness) that

enables and conditions the conception of a sentient being. Some of the names for this energy are: 'Karma-vega' (karma impulse), 'karma-tendencies,' 'thought-energy' and 'thought-force' when referring to sankhara 'the past life cause for the present body & mind. 'craving-impulse,' 'craving potential,' 'grasping tendency' and 'grasping force,' when referring to the tanha, upadana & bhava that condition a future life. This ties in to the second half of question II.

IIb. The commentaries, unlike the Pali Canon, go into great detail when describing the process of rebirth and the subsequent factors which influence a person's life. Apart from karmic tendencies accrued in past lives, and stored primarily in our unconsciousness as memory or potential energy, other factors include our physical environment, our social environment, heredity, and our psychological activity of this life. Because the mind and body are interrelated, each can influence and mold the other. More emphasis, however, is given to the power of the mind. Apparently, the 'grasping tendency' or 'grasping impulse' present in the last mind moment at a person's death is able to affect the physical dynamics at the moment of conception. Therefore, at syngamy this force will have a determining role in shaping the genetic makeup of the new individual. (A Tibetan book I'm reading by Tenzin Choedruk even claims that this energy's predilection even determines the sex of the new embryo.) Of course, based on the genetic material available from the parents, certain characteristics are more or less fixed. But even here the karmic-tendencies play a role, due to the law of affinity: that mental energy will seek out an environment that is compatible with its nature. After conception and birth, environmental influences, both physical and social, add to

the equation. So in response to your question about birth abnormalities, etc., the Buddhist view is that this being has played a volitional part in choosing these characteristics; they are not merely accidental. Karma's operation becomes even more complex when considering the circumstances and events we encounter throughout our lives. But even with these events, the Buddhist standpoint is that karma has a role to play. I once quoted to you a part of the Culakammavibhanga Sutta from the Majjhima Nikaya: "If a person who has committed violent, destructive acts in a past life comes back to the human state, then wherever he is reborn he is short-lived. This is the way that leads to short life, namely, one kills living beings and is murderous." Obviously this teaching demands a reinterpretation of our contemporary Western ideas of innocence and justice. As for the Jew whose family was turned to soap, my personal belief is that in some way he played a part in the sequence of events. We may never know what part it is that we play in these events, but if we reflect that things happen because the causes and conditions are ripe, then we can accept them and move on. Because we don't posit the existence of a fixed self acting as agent, we don't fall into the extreme of developing an unhealthy guilt complex. But because we take some responsibility for the events that befall us, we don't look to shift the blame on others. And this doesn't imply a fatalistic approach towards life, because in each moment we are creating fresh karma. The highest karma that the Buddha praised is karma for the ending of all karma: our efforts to purify the heart and be completely free of ignorance.

III. All of this ties in with your question on chance and justice. As I understand it, no, there is no such thing as

chance in Buddhism. There are many variables, as mentioned above, which affect how the universe unfolds. Although these variables are so manifold that it's impossible to follow them all, they nonetheless abide by certain laws. These laws pertain to the physical, psychological and moral domains. The future, to a large extent, is in our hands, however. The Buddha said: "If someone says that a man must necessarily reap according to all his deeds, in that case no religions striving is possible, nor is there an opportunity to end suffering." Karmic laws, therefore, state tendencies rather than inevitable consequences. Another important reminder is that volitional acts do not ripen chronologically, in the order that they are performed. For all fields of action there are both immediate and delayed results. The Canon mentions three types of karma: 1) karma bearing fruit in this lifetime 2) Karma bearing fruit in the next life 3) Karma bearing fruit in later lives. Regarding fruition, the commentaries list the order of precedence as follows: 1) Weighty karma 2) Death-proximate karma 3) Habitual karma 4) Miscellaneous reserve karma. Furthermore, later acts can either strengthen & expedite, obstruct & delay, or completely nullify previous karma. I think you get an idea of how intricate is the web.

For further study I recommend the following, all published by the Buddhist Publication Society:

"Rebirth As Doctrine And Experience" by Francis Story
Wheel Publication #9: Karma & Rebirth
Wheel Publication #141-3: Survival & Karma
Wheel Publication #167-9: Rebirth Explained
Wheel Publication #248-9: Buddha's Words On Karma

Following are some excerpts:

“Karma's operation are characterized by perfect justice, since Karma is a strict accountant. Therefore each man gets his exact deserts, not more not less.”

“Human beings have an element of free will, or personal endeavor, and exercising such, they can change their own nature as well as their environment (by understanding it) for the good of themselves as well as others. In this sense man is master of his fate.”

“Thus Buddhism takes into account all the factors which the geneticist, the sociologist and the psychologist insist upon as being ingredients of the fully developed personality, while adding the extra element, that of karma, which is necessary to weld them into a logical pattern.”

“Not all events or experience are due to past karma. More than one cause is needed to produce a given effect. External agencies also influence phenomena, and it is usually impossible to decide which factor is predominant, a past-karma-result, or an effect of causes in the external world, because both occur in combination.”

“An individual receives from his parents not a set of fully-formed characters but a set of determinants or genes, as a consequence of whose activities the hereditary characters are developed. This concept of hereditary determinants is fundamental for an understanding of heredity. The determinants are therefore only a contribution to the sum total of characters, or personality. The extent to which they are decisive must depend very largely on other factors, not all of which are to be accounted for by environment.

Heredity and the predispositions from past karma may be complementary to one another, as when attachment leads to repeated rebirth in the same racial group; or the karmic tendencies may modify or counteract the hereditary characteristics.”

Overall, things are well. My poor health still plagues me, but there are indications the even this stubborn condition may be subject to change, even improvement. Yes, I have been to the Wimbledon Temple, a slice of Thailand in London, with funky paintings. I haven't been to the British Museum.
Ajarn



Dear Ajarn,

Greetings Venerable friend. It's been 5 months since I received your last e-mail. I would like to follow up on that response with my research on the subjects therein, ask some new questions, and relate what has transpired with ol' TEASE (temporary-energized-aggregated- sensing-entity) Richard.

I left my apartment and Bo tree in Bangkok, did some traveling to China and presently I'm writing this on an old Hermes manual typewriter (hence the unfamiliar script) while ensconced in my retreat Kutu in the San Ysidro Mountains on the border of Mexico and California.

I would like to first of all express three “thank yous”. Thanks for bearing with me for 2 years of question and answer e-mails in a discussion with considerable

disagreement and maybe impertinence on my part. As before, I have saved every page sent/ received and you have embodied the compassion you espouse.

Thanks also for the information about where to go in Bangkok to get the travel umbrella (glot). I went to that store in Thonburi and found a nice glot with sewn-in floor and zippered mosquito netting. My camping and meditation travels are greatly improved.

Finally thanks for mentioning the work of Stephen Batchelor, whose books I searched for in vain in Bangkok (all sold out), but in so looking found an even more wonderfully stimulating book on Buddhism- “The monk and the philosopher”, by Revel and Ricard, 1998, Schocken Books. This book is a debate between father, Revel, an acclaimed French philosopher, and his son, Ricard, a doctor of molecular biology who left his lab in Paris to become a Tibetan Buddhist monk of more than 30 years. As far as laying out the issues between Buddhist ideas, teachings and practice (the Dhamma) and science and philosophy, this book is in my findings, unexcelled. I have spent several months trying to read and digest that book. Admittedly, our exchange has detailed some of the discussion and disagreement contained in above, but with utter humbleness we don't begin to match the wit, precision and erudition of two French intellectuals. I do have a few criticisms and spin-offs which I would like to, as it were, meld into a response and questions to our last e-mail.

Also, I have since found and read the Stephen Batchelor book “Buddhism Without Beliefs”, and it appears that he is essentially saying what I have maintained throughout

our discussion about some problems with a praxis to “discipline the mind and stop suffering” versus a panoply of unverifiable beliefs. As the endorsement from Time magazine states- “Batchelor...suggests that Buddhism jettison reincarnation (sic) and karma, thereby making possible what he calls an 'existential, therapeutic and liberating agnosticism.’” The book notes that Batchelor lives and teaches in Devon, England. I would be very interesting to know if he will lecture in Thailand in the future (also your prospective teaching appointments). I shall be back to the “land of smiles” soon (I was offered to teach an “English for artists” short course at Silpakorn Art University in Bangkok, but for now I'm too busy with research and production of new art works. Though extremely marginal, I feel I'm teaching with my art.)

After the above “catch-up” on current impermanent conditions, and taking a cue from Ajarn Batchelor, TEASE would like to further discuss the “Three Biggies” of Buddhism. Not “Annica, Dukka, Anatta” (which I agree to/with), nor “greed, anger, delusion” (the three of which must be extinguished), but the biggest of the big--”Karma, Rebirth and Nirvana.”

Your admonition about “unhinging the mind” and leaving inside the “poisoned arrow” I take with full cognizance, all the while knowing that TEASE comes wounded already with these afflictions to the discussion! While studying your last e-mail what constantly came to mind was the principle of Karma and its relation to chance or accidents as well as human inheritance ideas. Besides reading the two above mentioned books, I re-read the Dhammapada, I read a recent book on Science and Religion, a book on Karma, a book on History of God, a book on Yoga, and

Carl Jung's final writings. I looked at the ideas of Lamarck, Lysenko, and Newton, I contacted three PhD. acquaintances and one Zen Abbot for advice. Finally, I looked again at a book on Philosophy of Metaphysics, specifically the study of "Causation" (that really unhinged my mind more-but I'll make it).

What follows will be a rambling personal take on the above (I found some rusty screws to support the hinge) and remember I'm writing all of this not only clarify my own thought on the subject, but in the hopes you shall get some stimulation for your teaching. Also like Batchelor's critique of Buddhism, I hope to provide somewhat of a scorecard or "bingo" sheet for someone who may be drawn to Buddhism as a religion-philosophy, yet with reservations about some teachings (dare I say Dogmas).

As a further disclaimer, recall that I am an artist, and as such I am free to make use of the imagination, maybe even drawing up things from the unconscious wherein all creative thought "simmers". Art means many things to many people, for me art is an expression of the human "quest", its contribution to the things not just "seen and thought" but "what will be seen and thought". I also want to strive for simplicity. I taped a lecture by Astronomy Professor Timothy Ferris who maintained that if you can't explain your idea to a bartender (or I would add a housemaid), then it's probably not a good idea. In philosophy this is called "Okkham's razor" or the "Principle of Parsimony" - one must accept the simplest hypothesis explaining data. Returning to the subject at hand, I must say that after intensive study of Karma, Rebirth and Nirvana, and with your considered teaching assistance, I still have no comprehensive understanding of

what these principles really are or how they operate.

You may feel we have discussed these issues enough but I still have some concepts to work out and question and maybe formulate a sense of these three principles which I can have “faith” in. I do uphold a different understanding of these, mentioned in previous letters, but one non Buddhist. That different Buddhist schools have explained these principles slightly differently suggests they are open to speculation. I would like to examine further Karma (and responding to our last e-mails) because Karma seems to be the “cornerstone” or better “the vehicle” which drives Rebirth (samsara) leading to the goal of Nirvana.

The way you described Karma in the last e-mail was nothing short of a “hand of God”. The way Karma is somehow stored, passed on, then allocated, or maybe lies dormant, surfacing in this life or waiting for the next, interfacing with genetic inheritance or choosing not to, and having the ability to neutralize or aggrandize itself. Then this “stuff” can influence plane crashes, natural disasters or any such event which may befall a human being. Indeed nothing is accidental nor due to chance. I don't see how this differs much from religionists who maintain that an “angel” or celestial watch keeper is tabulating all the events and not only volitional ones at that. Why not just call it “God's revenge”?

The rusty hinge is creaking and I'm looking for the Okkham's razor. In my readings I found Karma called “the rhythmic return to harmony”, or “retributive action”, or the “doctrine of compensation”. I investigated the “universal law of cause and effect”, not found in science but the abstruse philosophy of causation wherein to put it

simply... there may be one or more causes leading to one or more effects; there may also be effects of an entirely different order ensuring from a particular or several causes. There are a multitude of propositions of causality, and none seem to be “universal”. Furthermore there are minuscule causes and effects which are undetectable or influenced by an observer.

I've heard Karma referred to as the 3rd. Law of Newton- “every action is attended by an equal and opposite reaction- object A exerts a force vector F on object B, then object B exerts a force vector on object A”. I had physics in college and (beyond the far-fetched use of this for Karma) there are other things to consider in the formula like mass, friction, momentum and gravity, and our world is an “open system” wherein multitudes of environmental factors intervene. Get out that razor now...!

I like what you said in the last e-mail about telling people to witness cause and effect in their lives and that you conduct your life by the principle of “as one sows so one reaps”. I agree with this and emphasize “this life”, while maintaining that often (remember the Biblical story of Job) one may reap a good deal more or less than that which was sowed. It is here where the past-life Karma enters, the intricacies of which only a seer, a Buddha or God can unravel.

In my life I discover considerable “uncertainty” with regard to the consequences of action (including volitional action). I thought of asking you if you've ever tried to think how Karma or the “stream of consciousness” by which it is carried moves about, where and how it is stored, how it locates a body in which to manifest, and

how the accounting of actions and retribution is carried out. It truly is a supernatural event. And I wanted to ask you how someone can hold that there are no accidents or chance events. Don't go to Florida which just had four successive hurricanes hit there. It does truly boggle the mind how anyone could not posit an accident, let alone the justification for one. I thought of asking these questions, but it seems you answered them by saying how infinite and indecipherable is the web of Karma. Or just flat out abide by the Kalamma sutra and practice "those things which are wholesome, blameless, commended by the wise, and being adopted and put into effect shall lead to welfare and happiness".

Instead I would like to use the "razor" and explain it for a bartender/housemaid (or monk). All humans have inherited all that has proceeded them- animal, mineral, vegetable (this is a "kind of rebirth" of material and mental "stuff"). Nothing really matters but everything counts. We are it, it is us, thou art that, and that's that. "Goodness is Godness", and to be as close to and knowledgeable of whatever is "God" "one must live as good as one is able.

To have the best possible life with the least suffering is also attained by "goodness". "Goodness" is an expression of "love" which is in human terms the energy manifestation of "gravity" by which the celestial and micro-cosmic bodies are attracted one to another.

"Karma" is an overused word too often flouted in "Headshops, tv sitcoms and New Age self-help books" (as well as the 'organized religions'). A better term for Karma would be "Goodness-Badness-Quotient", abbreviated as

“GBQ”. One’s “GBQ” will determine the extent one will be as close to and knowledgeable to “God” as well as have the least about of suffering encountered in that life.

Nevertheless...”S__T” Happens! Our current era is characterized by uncertainty about the beginning, operation, and extent of the cosmos as well as human life. As to any meaning one must say there is “no meaning or any meaning is unknowable”. Certainty about uncertainty can with certainty be uncertain.

Chance is accidental and all accidents occur by chance events. Living organisms evolve by natural selection through accidental (chance) mutations in the genetic makeup of those organisms. A new genetic makeup may enable an organism to thrive and reproduce offspring under particular environmental conditions.

An individual is responsible for its “GBQ”, all the while subject to its inheritance and environmental contributions. The “GBQ” of our ancestors and the “GBQ” of others in contemporaneous existence may effect our current overall “GBQ”.

No one is coming, no one cares, no one can help but ones self. Accept the situation and the mystery... Look at the Big Picture Show... we exist through a contribution of eons of symbolic thought, self-awareness, and culture... Take your chance, and it's no accident that your “GBQ” will lead to God (Buddhahood).

Well the bartender threw me out and the housemaid hit me with her broom, the razor is dulled and the hinge is loose but holding... Your comment is appreciated...

Richard (TEASE)



Dear Ricard/TEASE,

I would have to add, after the bartender and maid's reply to your 'Principle of Parsimony' (Pop!), that the monk simply smiled, but that would be boasting. You ask for comment, and in the spirit of goodwill befitting the Christmas season I offer what comes to mind.

Languages – words – are vessels for meaning, and even if we haven't directly experienced what we speak about the words we use to convey an intuition or a 'felt potential' end up shaping the way we see the world. You are correct in pointing out the similarity between the abstruseness and pseudo-mysticism of the law of karma with traditional descriptions of God. The Pali Canon, however, invariably defines karma as a law of nature; at no point does it attribute this dynamic to some higher consciousness or Supreme Being. As a student of physics you will know that much still remains unknown about the laws of relativity and quantum mechanics. We may not know how all the physical laws interrelate but this doesn't paralyze us and prevent us from going about our daily business using the knowledge that we do possess. I don't think I can shed any more light on how karma operates. As I've mentioned before we don't need to understand it exhaustively for the heart to be released. I'm presently in the middle of F. Capra's *The Tao of Physics*, and although I believe he's got the wrong end of the stick much of the time about the Buddha's teachings, I suppose one could call Karma a 'field theory of the mind'; karma is an 'energy knot, which by no means is clearly delineated against the remaining field.' (Creak, creak goes the hinge).

I'm not sure why you group Nirvana along with karma and rebirth. Karma and rebirth are part of samsara; they are unrelated to Nirvana. The Buddha said that once Nirvana has been realized all of our doubts about karma are dispelled. Karma no longer has any relevance except in recognizing how it still affects others, which prompts us to help out of compassion. Although one can say that 'good' or 'white' karma leads to Nirvana, one only awakens to Nirvana when one knows the utter cessation of karma. We may speak of Nirvana as the 'Greatest Good' or the 'Highest Happiness,' but this only speaking in metaphor – no words, including 'Nirvana,' can do Nirvana justice. But back to your comments. Who is this God you speak about? And what is this 'self' you mention: 'no one can help but one's self'? As you probably know the passages in the Canon repeatedly deny a fixed, separate self, either within people or manifesting as the Divine. To invest such meaning in these words risks leading people astray. I have reached the proofreading stage in translating chapter 3 of Ajahn Payutto's Buddha-Dhamma, on the three characteristics. In relation to anatta AP spends a fair bit of time on the misperception of self, where we go beyond appreciating the conventional reality and overlap some imagined absolute quality onto phenomena, including our 'selves'. The following passages are of relevance to our discussion:

'One harmful consequence of clinging to a self, or believing in an image of self, is that one concludes that the self is the agent, with power to control events. When the notion of self becomes most subtle, a sovereign, universal Self is envisaged, as the Creator of all things. This Creator is imagined as intervening in the causal process, despite such intervention being unnecessary. It is unnecessary

because nature exists autonomously; interrelated conditioned dynamics function independently, without requiring a Creator. Rather than say that a Creator, a God, must exist as a prerequisite for the genesis of all things, grant natural phenomena themselves to be the primordial reality (since natural phenomena are reciprocally created in line with causality; simply speaking, they create each other.) One need then not be troubled with questions of the past as, 'What existed before God,' 'Who created God,' or 'From where does God come'.

'It is neither necessary nor true to say that natural phenomena, or causal dynamics, require a creator God to exist. If a God were truly the creator, the result would be two overlapping systems: God and nature. The course of nature would need to wait for the creative act of God. Natural dynamics subject to divine designs would be unwieldy, however, since they must proceed in accord with causes and conditions within their own system. As the components within a dynamic arise and cease in a continual, inter-causal fashion, acts of God would interfere and obstruct the dynamic. Moreover, as God's temperament can vacillate, natural phenomena would be affected accordingly; at one moment God would have them be one way, and in the next moment another way. As a consequence, nature would have even less opportunity to follow causality, ending in great confusion and chaos. This is not, however, the way things actually are; natural dynamics occur in conformity with their conditionality.

'Some people may say that natural, causal dynamics follow laws, and that God created or established these laws. In that case the laws must be uncertain, liable to change at any time, and untrustworthy, because the

ordainer of the laws would abide beyond the laws; such a Being could modify the laws as desired. These laws, however, have invariably remained constant. The existence of a Creator of the laws is unnecessary and improbable, because nature must proceed in a specific fashion. Natural conditions accord with causes, and are 'just so' (tathata): they are not and could not be otherwise (avithata). The laws themselves are merely descriptions, which we form in conformity with specific natural occurrences. Furthermore, the absence of a creator God and the autonomy of causal dynamics also resolves another question: Ultimate Reality, or the Unconditioned, is absolute; it does not meddle as the Creator of phenomena or interfere with conditioned processes. (From this perspective, Nirvana cannot be God, nor matter how much some people try to equate them, unless one is willing to redefine the meaning of 'God').

'Under ordinary circumstances, it is natural for people to believe in a self and in a Creator of the world, because things ostensibly require an agent or creator to come into being. Seeing through this false belief to underlying causality is difficult. Therefore, in former times people believed that gods were the sole causes behind lightning, winds, floods and earthquakes. It is not strange then that religious seekers and philosophers believe in a soul and a Creator. Clever individuals created more refined, all-embracing concepts, but essentially they were stuck at the same point. The Buddha's discovery of the quality of nonself and release from self-identification, despite the probability that he would get stuck in more refined notions of self, and his subsequent revelation that causation occurs without a Creator, and that the Unconditioned, the Ultimate Truth, exists neither as a self nor with any

creative involvement, counts as an enormous advance in human wisdom. It is the escape from the massive pitfall which has trapped human beings. Despite understanding the characteristics of impermanence and dukkha, the great philosophers before the Buddha were hampered by the belief in a self or soul. The characteristic of selflessness is therefore extremely difficult to see. The Buddha tended to use the characteristics of impermanence and dukkha to indicate and explain anatta. The commentators recognised the need to explain selflessness by way of impermanence and dukkha, and valued this major advance in wisdom as a revelation not found before or outside Buddhism...'

(The meaning of the words Phra Jao (Thai for 'God,' literally 'Excellent Lord') and the English 'God' are vague. Phra Jao was originally a word used by Buddhists as an epithet for the Buddha (Phra Phu Pen Jao, Venerable Lord, is still a form of address to monks). Once Christians adopted this term to refer to their God, Buddhists abandoned it until they forgot the original meaning. As for the word 'God,' Christians use this term to denote the Supreme Divinity, who they believe created the world, and is characterised as a Being. Some philosophers, however, broaden the meaning of God to be an abstract quality, not necessarily involved with the world's creation. Some contemporary Christian theologians define God in a similar way, not as a Being, but Christian establishments reject these definitions (or outright condemn them); When Hans Kng (in *Does God Exist? An Answer for Today*, trans. Edward Quinn. London: Collins, 1980, pp. 594-602) tried to compare God with Nirvana, he realized the difference, as Nirvana is not involved in the creation of the world.)

I have read The Monk and the Philosopher and enjoyed it; I even gave a copy to my father, who is a professor of Economics. As for my teaching schedule, I encourage people to come to the monastery rather than my going out traveling. Here we have a very quiet environment, excellent lay-support, and plenty of time to pursue studies.

I trust that this finds you well, either in the Land of Smiles or in the Pacific mountains.

Peace,
Ajarn



FROM AJARN

Memento Mori – Remember You Must Die. Such is the inscription one finds on gravestones, reminding us of our inescapable fate. In the monastery it would be apt to carve this reminder on every door lintel. The Buddha said that anyone reflecting on death less frequently than the duration of one mouthful of food, or one in-and-out breath, is practising negligently. This is not an incitement to morbid fascination, but rather an encouragement to recognize the true nature of things. Marana-sati, mindfulness of death, must be seen in context of other teachings, especially those on impermanence and on the repeated creation (birth) of a fixed sense of identify. For many the thought of death brings fear – a fear of extinction or of facing the unfamiliar. And instinctively we associate death with pain. Yet the Buddha taught that death can be met with peace and acceptance. Because our ability to unravel the intricacies of cause and effect remains

limited, we enter each new moment, and each new season of our lives, with a degree of uncertainty. Facing this uncertainty with a minimum of anxiety requires trusting the sincerity of our spiritual endeavors, and trusting in the efficacy of this path. As another year ends we may not know what to expect for the future, but we can develop a strength and confidence to receive each new moment.

*The past has been left behind
And the future has not been reached.
With insight let a person see
Each presently arisen state.
Today the effort must be made;
There is no bargaining
with Death and his mighty horde.*
(Bhaddekaratta Sutta)



Dear Ajarn,

Yes “happy new ear” because I'm glad to hear from you and also happy new year to you. Thanks for the response and it will take awhile for me to digest the material and send a further discussion.

I've been back to Thailand for a couple of months after touring China for a month. Busy with new paintings and research, digging the stimulation of smoggy, hot Bangkok, and enjoying camping at lake and seaside in my glot.

I didn't expect a Christmas inspired mail form you, a Bhikku. I particularly like the absence of the commercial madness surrounding that event amongst my niche in

Buddhist land. I do exchange new years letters with friends scattered about. This year I even thought to ask Santa to give condoms to all the priests (lubricated ones) and fresh ammunition to all the mullahs and rabbis. The scandal and disgrace of those sects leaves old tease dumbfounded. But more on that and other earthshaking issues in the next e-mail.

Best regards,
PEACE,
tease Richard



Dear Ajarn,

Two months since our last exchange of e-mails. I hope this finds you well and maybe just finishing winter meditation retreat. In Bangkok I have been very involved with new art work and research on the issues we have talked about. I would like to comment on some things from the last letter, maybe relate them to the Tsunami disaster in the Andaman sea, and close with some new questions. Thanks again for staying with me. I was thinking of a Philosophy Professor I once had who gave extra credit on essay exams for any creative ideas (or humor) exhibited by the student in his writing. Because I'm a person who works in a creative field I hope you won't dismiss me when I try to discuss issues in a spontaneous way. If I criticize something its with the hope to make things better, and although it may be un-Buddhist or even considered unwholesome (akusala) to criticize...in my opinion that's the only way things are improved. The last e-mail touched upon some particularly difficult issues...God, the self, laws of nature,

creation, language meaning, kamma, and memento mori. Wow this has really gotten thick hasn't it? I wish I had my own computer on which to write to concentrate better, but here I am in an Internet place with lots of people, traffic on the street and jazz on the sound system. I feel like I'm writing an essay in a school exam and even paying for it by the hour.

First the Tsunami disaster. In my last short message to you after scolding the religionists was a final line about “other earthshaking issues”. That comment was about 24 hours before the earthquake and Tsunami happened. The reference to “earthshaking” was purely “by chance” for I assure you I had no prognostic notions. Yet somehow that word “earthshaking” was picked up on the Internet and the word got out that some ignominious artist had predicted the disaster to come. Hailed as the “miracle of Banglumpoo”, my hotel room was besieged by hordes of sycophants and news persons amidst my flower bedecked doorway clogged by offerings. Even a nomination for sainthood was said to be considered...and would I help on an early warning system...

I don't mean to be offensive in making satire out of a disaster in which almost 300,000 people died but I want to illustrate a point of how the co-incidence of two unrelated, unpredicted and separately caused events can more some people to make false judgments. Psychologists jokingly refer to this syndrome as the P.T. Barnum effect, “there's a seeker born every day”!

I followed with great interest the newspaper editorials and such which appeared after the Tsunami. I shall list a bevy of responses...

“it's easy to explain man's inhumanity to man, but for this the religions have a good deal to explain”

“it's a chance to show compassion for all religious believers, since all were affected, maybe that's why God did it”

“centered off Achae, a breakaway province, God was unhappy with them”

“a chance for political appeasement through Western aid for the impoverished and embattled south Asia”

“happening at around 9 AM it affected the early birds out and about at that hour (the early bird gets the worm...but the second mouse gets the cheese)”

LASTLY AND MOST COGENT TO OUR DISCUSSION...

“it was their Karma”

In our discussion I have come to understand your particular Buddhist position with regard to Karma (though as indicated in my letters there are somewhat differing opinions by Ajarn Sumedo, Ven.Buddhadasa, Steven Batchelor, and Alan Watts).

From what you stated in letters there is no such thing as “chance” in Buddhism (which I take to mean “no accidents”). Furthermore all those who died or were injured in the disaster (like the Jew whose family turned to soap) were “in some way playing a part in the sequence of events” befalling them. The perfect justice of Karma you quoted and the ability of Karma to interact with external agencies (natural events) would, it seems, explain the lost lives. I know you counsel to not worry about the intricacies of Karma which are “incomprehensible except to the vision and understanding of a Buddha”, so I will leave it like that but invite a further teaching if you feel

moved.

Well for me, TEASE (temporary energized aggregated sensing entity), being an unattached freelance monk yogi, I think I'll stay with what I feel to be a more reasonable position as simplified in a previous letter. Remember my talking the razor to supernatural gobblely gook; the certainty of uncertainty; an indifferent and mostly universe; the difference between science and unprovable propositions; a call for a “modern mysticism of secular scientific spirituality” with a commitment to the realization that we individual aggregates are nothing other than the Universe exploring itself. What there is, is us, and that “us” has been going on in infinite change infinitely.

I tried to express in my last letter my feeling that Kamma (or goodness badness quotient GBQ) was indeed operable in “this life”, in this aggregated body-mind (TEASE). I just posit a host of factors which interact with and may override any GBQ (Kamma) actions. “Ones self” is the expression of these aggregates (khandas) upon ones environment. I never implied any fixed, unchangeable, permanent self. In regards to “God” I mentioned that concept because it is usually connected with any system of “religion” or re-connection with the ultimate. Buddha was silent on this issue yet proposed demi gods on differing levels of existences (I read where Buddha's followers were called the “no-soul or no-God school” before referred to as Buddhists).

I remain agnostic on the issue (thank God I'm agnostic) because after considerable study of the subject there is finally no way to either prove or disprove God. Even the argument you mentioned from Ven. Payutto's treatise

could in the final resort be overridden by an all powerful Creator with what is called “methodological intent” (a position rabidly espoused by the creationist activists and their intelligent design).

Any referral to a supreme divinity is a question of metaphysics or blind leap of faith.

I am particularly drawn to Taoist notions, the Tao (or God) being the Way or better “the Why” things work (or why things like cause and effect happen). Ultimately it cannot be explained or even spoken of. I did close my last letter with saying that goodness is Godness and ones “GBQ will lead to God (Buddhahood).” Ajarn respond if you like, I have lots of other questions for your counsel of Buddhist dhamma.

Peace and metta,
Ricard TEASE



Dear Richard/Tease,

Due to some writing deadlines I won't send you a long e-mail now but hope to get to it soon. But perhaps you are enjoying the new-found guru status (Luang Phu means Venerable Grandfather – close to Lumpoo), and thoughts of karma are far from your mind.

NEWSLETTER

FROM AJARN

The ancient Greeks regarded Nemesis, the daughter of Nyx – Night, as the goddess of retribution. She uphold justice, punishing those who transgress the natural order. The name Nemesis comes from a word meaning 'distributing what is due'. In English we use the word Nemesis to describe any agent of retribution or vengeance, be it a person or other challenging obstacle. In Thailand, forces associated with past karma, especially those unseen, are called Jao Kam Nai Wayn, translated as 'Lords of Arbitration, Master of Retribution,' A common Thai ceremony involves asking forgiveness from these personified forces, representing beings that we have offended or injured in the past. In a similar vein our daily chant of sharing blessings includes:

*May the highest gods and evil forces... may those who are
friendly,
indifferent or hostile; may all beings receive the blessings
of my life.*

Although frequently we can recognize the contributing factors behind our problems and can promptly solve them, there are times when the causes remain a mystery, and all of our attempts to rectify the situation appear to be in vain. These can be deeply troubling and testing times, leaving us in despair. When we feel that our understanding of a situation is limited we must resort to complementary spiritual faculties like trust, patience and goodwill. We thus promote both greater tenderness and fortitude of heart, and develop a healthy fear of acting in any way that may create suffering in the future.

*Nowhere-
Not in the sky, the ocean, or in a mountain cave -*

Can one escape the retribution of unskillful deeds.
(Dhammapada 127)

The Buddhist Path

To introduce Buddhism we must travel back through the mists of time, to the 6th century BC, and to a small kingdom in the Himalayan foothills. Here Siddhartha Gotama the crown prince was born. The prince grew up in the lap of luxury and spent his early life enjoying royal privileges. But at the age of twenty-nine, soon after his wife Yasodhara had given birth to a son, the prince ventured out from the palace confines and while exploring the countryside encountered the four 'divine messengers': A gravely sick person, an old decrepit person, a corpse, and a spiritual seeker, with shaven head and clad in robes. Prince Siddhartha was so shocked by the first three encounters, realizing that his loved ones were also prone to these dangers, that he determined to leave the palace and seek a solution. During the next six years he first trained with the most esteemed religious teachers of his day, and then undertook extreme austerities in his search for salvation. Seeing that self-mortification is as equally damaging as unbridled sensual indulgence he relaxed his straining and discovered what he later called the 'Middle Way'. On a full-moon night in May, under the Bodhi Tree, he awakened to the Truth: knowledge arose concerning the cause and the utter stilling of mental suffering. After this point he was called the Buddha, the 'Awakened One'.

The Buddha spent the remaining forty-five years of his life traveling through India and spreading his teaching, the Dhamma. His followers stemmed from all walks of life,

from kings to manual laborers, merchants and Brahmins – members of the priestly class. Although many of his disciples (Sangha) were ordained as monks and nuns, his teaching equally addresses the spiritual responsibilities of the laity. Socially, his most revolutionary act was to redefine the caste system, claiming that true dignity and worth do not hinge on a person's family or social background, but rest on the goodness of a person's heart.

The Buddha based his teaching on the Four Noble Truths, which in a nutshell present a diagnosis and a cure for all mental 'dis-ease'. The Buddha claimed that every human being is afflicted with some degree of mental illness, consisting of the myriad expressions of greed, hatred and confusion. He went on to say, however, that this affliction does not arise arbitrarily or haphazardly, but that it is rooted in our habitual responses to life's experience. He encourage us to act like scientists, to investigate the causes for our mental discomfort and to rectify them.

The Buddha's prescription for perfect mental health is the Noble Eightfold Path, symbolized by the wheel. This path is gradual, comprised of three stages: Moral integrity, mental equilibrium, and wisdom. (Note that this is not a strictly linear model; we can attend to all three stages simultaneously.)

We begin by creating an atmosphere of safety for other living creatures by developing such virtues as generosity, kindness, trustworthiness, respect, and honesty. This leads to an absence of anxiety and remorse, and gives rise to joy.

Next we train the mind in a way similar to taming a wild horse. This stage is called 'meditation': we learn to balance

our effort, sustain our awareness, and concentrate the mind. The initial benefit of this is to engender peace and tranquility. But equally important is the ensuing stability and power of the mind, preparing it for the tasks undertaken by wisdom.

The final stage involves investigating the laws of nature. For example, we observe how all worldly phenomena, both physical and mental, are impermanent. Everything that arises on account of supporting conditions decays and disintegrates when those conditions are no longer present. Everything that is born must die. We realize that these laws are not capricious occurrences of a chaotic universe, but that they are part of its fabric. No matter how hard we struggle to oppose them the struggle is in vain. Slowly it begins to dawn on us that rather than contend we have the option to accept them, to live in harmony with them. Wisdom refers not merely to our intellect and reason; it denotes a direct experience of some truth. Similes for wisdom are 'vision' and 'insight'. Spiritual awakening is compared to a cure for blindness; we see for the first time what has always been in front of our eyes.

*Irrigators channel water;
Fletchers straighten arrows;
Carpenters craft wood;
The wise tame themselves.*

The Buddha claimed that direct knowledge of these natural laws facilitates a liberation of the mind. An irrevocable transformation occurs, which means that the heart is never again enslaved by tormenting passions. This is Nibbana (Sanskrit: Nirvana), the 'extinction' of greed, hatred and delusion. What remains the Buddha said cannot

adequately be put into words. Most often he used negations to describe Nibbana (e.g. 'Freedom from Fear,' 'Imperishable'), although metaphors include 'Supreme Happiness' and 'Absolute Safety'. It is important to note that Nibbana is not considered a place like heaven, and also that Nibbana does not play a creative role in the world.

The mind in Buddhism is viewed as a stream of energy, similar to the way modern physics views matter. Although for practical purposes one can distinguish varying mental components, they should be seen as constantly influencing each other (as well as influencing the body, e.g. when our emotions affect our health.) A key element of the mind is volition. Our intentions trigger a chain reaction with far-reaching consequences. A synonym for intention is 'karma'. Karma refers to any deliberate action, including our verbal and physical behavior. The ripples that extend from our willful actions are believed to return to us in a form corresponding to their original quality, whether for good or for ill. The Buddha said that it is impossible to thoroughly comprehend the complexity of this causal web, even as we are unable to trace the exact pathways of subatomic particles. But just as we are able to draw conclusions about the physical world, we can recognize psychic patterns and learn lessons from them. The law of karma is nature's justice system: we reap as we sow.

*If one acts or speaks with a pure mind,
happiness follows,
As surely as a bright reflection
that never departs.*

In contrast the body ('dust to dust, ashes to ashes'), the

Buddha taught that at death the 'magnetism' and momentum within the mind leads to continuity. If the requisite physical ingredients are present consciousness completes the merger that we call conception: a new being is born. An exception to this is the death of a fully enlightened person, at which point the terms 'consciousness,' 'existence,' 'spirit,' etc. no longer apply: such a person has entered the ineffable. Furthermore, the Buddha said that it is possible to be reborn in different dimensions or realms of consciousness, not just the human realm currently visible. The claim that Buddhists do not believe in God is not entirely true; the Buddhist scriptures frequently refer to divine beings and acknowledge their glory. Heaven, however, is not the ultimate goal for Buddhists, since heaven is seen as part of samsara: the cycle of birth and death.

From the above we see that Buddhism is both a philosophy and a religion: it loves, honors and pursues wisdom, and it link us (re-ligare) to something supreme.

A final word should be mentioned on love. Love is both a key spiritual practice as well as an expression of liberation. Once we intimately know the stirrings of suffering, and once we have passed beyond selfish obsessions and anxieties, we can wholeheartedly extend a compassionate hand to others. This assistance can be rendered by direct acts of kindness or through prayer. Buddhists believe that a heart filled with love and compassions is boundless, and in this age of materialism this potential is highly underestimated.

Hatred is never appeased by hatred;

By love alone is it appeased.

This is an eternal law.



Dear Ajarn,

Happy Vesak Day from old Bangkok.

Thanks for your note and future discussion. I'm back to Thailand after making a big trip to Angkor Wat (really spectacular), Hong Kong again, and a short re-visit to my Kuti in San Ysidro mountains. I'll wait to hear from you before a long letter. I have read more Gandhi, Blavatsky's Secret Doctrine, Hazrat Khan's Nature Meditations, a new book on Science and Religion, and the hot off the press book on consciousness by a Nobel Prize winning neurobiologist...so I have many more questions.

Thoughts of karma are not “far from my mind” to say it again I think it's operable in this life, in this body but better called “goodness badness quotient” and that it interacts with chance events often with unexpected and unjust results. The question again is....”was it their karma which either killed or saved the many who died or escaped that last big Tsunami?”

Respectfully yours,
Richard TEASE



Dear Richard,

Firstly, may I say that my attempts to answer your questions on karma might have misrepresented the Buddha's teachings. As you point out Buddhist teachers have disparate explanations for the intricacies of karma. You might be familiar with the Abhidhama teachings on

Niyama, the 'ordinances of nature,' i.e. discernible laws and patterns.

These are classified as follows:

A. Utu-niyama: The laws concerning weather and other aspects of our external environment.

B. Bija-niyama: The laws concerning reproduction, including heredity.

C. Kamma-niyama: The laws concerning human behavior, i.e., the law of actions (karma) and their results.

D. Dhamma-niyama: The laws concerning the interrelationship of all things.

F. Citta-niyama: The laws concerning mental activities.

As you can see karma is only one of these groups. This teaching seems to indicate that indeed there are several strands of causal exchanges, each of which might operate independently yet impact on the others. How this works is unfathomably complex, but it does allow for an element of chance or accident. In the 'Shorter Exposition of Action,' the Buddha does claim that killing other creatures leads to a short life span (even affecting future lives) for the perpetrator, but he doesn't say how one must die. Personally I don't need to always know why things happen. Although the standard exhortation for promoting equanimity is the daily chant: "I am the owner of my kamma, heir to my kamma, born of my kamma, related to my kamma, abide supported by my kamma, whatever kamma I shall do, for good or for ill, of that I will be their heir," an equally powerful exercise is to simply accept that 'things happen' and that we cannot turn the clocks back.

To promote wisdom we must penetrate the law of Dependent Origination, which in a nutshell means that all

things exist because of causes. A unique offshoot of this law is the twelve-stage origin of suffering, beginning with ignorance. The Buddha specifically pointed to our reaction to life as it unfolds. Yes, as we grow wiser we can interact and influence both people and objects around us, but we must also be continually prepared for the unexpected.

I'm attaching an article.

Buddhist monasticism is the oldest unbroken monastic lineage in the world. Although the Buddha and many of his ordained disciples were peripatetic, numerous monasteries were founded during his lifetime. An annual three-month period of stability is mandatory for all monks and nuns, and it was natural for monastic communities to form near towns and villages.

During the centuries after the Buddha's passing away his teachings spread throughout India and beyond. Buddhist kingdoms extended to present day Afghanistan, Pakistan, Mongolia, Japan, and Indonesia. Two main Buddhist schools survived, referred to as the Northern and Southern, or the Mahayana and Theravada schools. The latter (literally, 'The Way of the Elders') is now predominantly found in Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia.

For scripture the Theravada tradition recognizes the Pali Canon, considered the oldest and most authentic body of texts. Most of the Canon is devoted to the Buddha's sermons and instructions, although several volumes cover the monastic discipline, the rules of conduct with their source stories.

Ever since the Buddha's day monasteries served different functions. In some the monks devoted their time to study, preserving the literal accuracy of the teachings. We are indebted to their effects, especially those monks who passed down the entire Canon orally for several hundred years before it was first written down on palm leaves. Other monasteries emphasized the various meditation techniques, with adept teachers passing down their knowledge to pupils. These latter communities tended to be established in remote wild places, where monks sometimes had to walk several miles to reach the nearest village. Just such a tradition of meditation monks was preserved in the jungles of Thailand. Many of these monks journeyed on foot for most of the year, only stopping for the three months of the monsoon. This tradition of Thai wandering monks was extant until fairly recently, its demise induced by the extensive deforestation of the 20th century. Abundant stories survive of the dangers they faced, including wild elephants, tigers, cobras and bouts with malaria. The most famous of these monks from the last century, and the great-grandfather of our lineage, was Ajahn Mun. Ajahn Mun had dozens of well-known and highly attained disciples, some of whom are still alive. One of these disciples was Ajahn Chah, a monk from the Northeast province of Ubon Rajathani near Laos. Ajahn Chah was unique in that he attracted a large following of Western disciples. In his simple yet profound teachings he would draw upon reflections from nature: the behavior of animals, the life of trees, and the environment.

You cannot force how quickly the fruit of wisdom develops, just as you cannot force the growth of a tree. A tree has its own pace. Your job is to dig a hole, and water, fertilize, and protect the tree from insects. That much is

your affair, a matter of trust. But the way the tree grows is up to the tree. If you practice like this, you can be sure all will be well, and your plant will grow. You must understand the difference between your work and the plant's work. Leave the plant's business to the plant, and be responsible for your own. If the mind does not know what it needs to do, it will try to force the plant to grow, flower, and bear fruit in one day.

(Ajahn Chah)

Ajahn Chah's first Western disciple was Ajahn Sumedho, an American who had been working with the Peace Corps. In 1977, after ten years of training, Ajahn Sumedho accepted an invitation from a group of English Buddhists to open a centre in Hampstead. Two years later he moved with a chapter of monks and nuns to Sussex to establish the first monasteries in England.

To insure that monks do not isolate themselves from society as hermits, the discipline prohibits fully ordained members from growing or storing food. We are entirely dependent on the lay community for our material sustenance. This system of mendicancy acts as a check and balance; we monks must continually review if our conduct is worthy of these offerings. If we misbehave we are likely to go hungry. Buddhist countries have preserved the tradition of almsround; at the break of dawn the monks enter the village to quietly collect food from the faithful. Although we experiment standing for alms (for example in Honiton), we usually have a postulant or lay-attendant in residence to help prepare and offer the meals.

In exchange for these material requisites the monks perform their responsibilities, which include study,

meditation, general upkeep of monastery and grounds, ministrations, and teaching. Teaching takes many forms: some people come with particular questions on meditation, others with personal difficulties, while others only wish to partake in the silence. We are occasionally invited to speak in schools, or to act as chaplains in prisons and hospitals.

The daily routine is as follows:

6:00 – 6:30: Morning meditation

7:00: Breakfast

8:30 – 11:00: Work period

11:30: Main meal

5:00 pm: Tea (beverages only as we observe a fast from midday until dawn)

7:00 – 8:00: Evening meditation & chanting

I consider it a great blessing to live in such an open-minded society, where people are able to pursue their personal faith in the spirit of goodwill and mutual respect. As Buddhists we are encouraged to view all beings as brothers and sisters in this strange journey through life and death. In this respect, of treasuring life and desiring true safety, we are not one human family.

A tree makes no distinction in the shade it gives. Even so, earnest students should make no distinction between any beings; they should develop love equally towards enemies and towards themselves, thinking, 'How may these beings be without enmity and without harm, how may they be at peace, secure and happy?'

(Nagasena; 1st cent. B.C.)



Dear Ajarn,

Thanks for your last e-mail on June 1st. I presume you are now in some form of “rains retreat” though what that may entail in August in England is questionable. Though TEASE is still TEASE I like the appellation Noble Hearer which I recall the Kamma group was referred to in that Kamma Sutra of which I read again and again. It may also be the furthest I shall encroach upon the Buddhist path since to become the next stage of Stream Enterer one must have greater acceptance of the Dhamma in which I have found what seems to be “Dogma”.

Concerning our discussion which is going on its third year I have second thoughts about a statement I made in past about the book “Monk and Philosopher” being so much more erudite and such than our writings. I now feel that we have introduced maybe more controversial idea and more humor and satire and general ummph!

I would like to sort of summarize the last few discussion with some final thoughts then move on.

The proposition of chance or accidental occurrences is a central issue for me. I am unfamiliar with the Abhidhamma teachings you mention on Niyama or ordinances of nature. I looked for these, to no avail, in some books at the Buddhist bookstore at Wat Bowaniwet near where I stay in Bangkok. As you say there are “several strands of causal exchanges”, “unfathomingly complex”, and do “allow for an element of chance or accident”.

I take this to mean that accidents happen but interact with

karmic potentials? Or maybe karma can interact or not (thus having it both ways). Thus for example I'm walking along and step on an ant. I take this to be a pure accident since the ant has no karma since it has no volitional actions. On the other hand if I were to purposely with volition step on that ant it is I who would garner some "negative" (I've forgotten the Buddhist word here) karma.

Ipsa facto the Tsunami wave (like the former footstep) has no volition yet as it crashes accidentally into humans capable of volitional actions, it is their karmic potentials (which may stretch back to numerous former births) which interact with the tidal wave. For them this situation is an accident plus Karma. For other animals or ants, having no volitional actions and no karma, the Tsunami situation is a pure accident.

This to me is the Buddhist proposition you have represented. Please correct me or comment on the above. Creak, creak, goes the rusty hinge again.

Moving on, at a recent WFB Sunday Dhamma talk question/answer session I brought up the fact that the day before was the Live Aid for Africa event. I questioned the Buddhist Dhamma Dogma that these people born in Africa living a wretched existence of poverty, disease and even with black skin was the result of their past actions (past birth karma). This seems to go contrary to all we know of geopolitics, evolution, genetics, etc. (unknown in Buddhas time). I wondered just when the volitional action "kicked in" building up karma during the evolution of those people in Africa. I mean for a hundred thousand years or a million years humans had volitional action and there was only black skin in the beginning. What would Secy. Condolea

Rice think of this?

Now a practical demonstration of what could be Karma would be Rice's ancestors making a volitional or maybe nonvolitional (as slaves) action to come to America. These ancestors struggled with suffering and work to get to the generation where Ms. Rice was sent to college and eventually became Dean of Stanford University. This to me could be considered practical Karma, as ye sow so ye reap. Now a Buddhist Dhamma Dogma would hold that if some negative event should occur the her it would accrue because of past births of her “mind streams” carrying negative karmas shown by her African ancestry and black skin. Do I have this right?

I guess if I'm only noble hearkener like the Kalamma the above must make for some confusion to me (out of respect for you I won't use the words here I really think). I'm also confused about the difference between 'dependent origination' and Karma.

Also I have problems with the use of scientific terms like “Law”, “energy”, “magnetism” and “momentum” in the explication of Dhamma. I think there is a danger in using them to describe what are plain and simply metaphysical (“beyond physics”) propositions. The above scientific terms are empirical, can be measured, and are supported by rigorous laboratory testing open to the approval or disapproval or others (scientific method).

Here I would like to mention the writings of Ken Wilber, a Zen Buddhist. If you are unfamiliar with his writings he has tirelessly proclaimed the inability of science to be used for proving or demonstrating religions (here read

“spiritual” or “Dhamma issues”). He was particularly harsh with Fritjof Capra's books. I recommend Wilber's “Quantum Questions”.

One final thought. This past Ashala Puja ceremonies held at Sanam Luang in Bangkok I witnessed the appearance of the most horrible looking “man” I've ever seen (and I saw lepers in India who were walking scabs). This person not very tall and with a somewhat large head was covered over his entire skin with millions of bubble-like lumps. His appearance was more like a mushroom or fungus growing on a tree. Yet this wretch was rather jolly and didn't seem to care who was staring at him in disbelief. Most remarkable was the fact this man was a MONK WEARING THE ORANGE ROBE! Here is most convincing proof of the power of belief or faith in the doctrine. Though others would have surely committed suicide, he was working out his Karma dutifully. I was impressed.....

Because you have sent me auxiliary material from your monastery including your writing therein (which may show some influence from our discussion) I decided to send an attachment of couple of pages of a letter I sent to a good friend in Italy. He's a Professor of Economics (like your father) and we are used to somewhat caustic debate in the Latin style (I'm half Italian). The letter may seem coarse to you maybe like the above discussion of Karma but I'm sure it will elicit sparks in your cortex and hopefully lead to next exchange between us. Please comment as you wish...

As a final aside I would like to relate that I feel I'm generating positive Karma by bringing up these sensitive

issues, calling for reform or toleration or just live and let live...

Happy Rains Retreat,
Richard TEASE



Caro BEN,

Hope this finds you and family doing well on your most recent cycle. You must be eating a bunch as they do in old Italia. I'll never forget the lunch I had with a Rome Carabinieri who I met while serving at NATO. He took me to their cafeteria in Rome where I gorged on antipasto and a mountain of spaghetti before finding two more courses and dessert. Mama Mia! Riccardo is still in Asia, Bangkok at the moment, after much travel of late to China, Hong Kong, and Cambodia (Angkor spectacular as the Great Wall). I am still pursuing my philosophy research as well as new series of paintings. One new double canvas scroll is titled "Shroud of the Apostates" after the fake of Turin. It hasn't been listed at Sotheby's as yet but it and others are looking for exhibition venue. Are you doing any art-sculpture furniture designing? Know any galleries or collectors? Concerning the religious issues, I'm still debating with the senior Buddhist monk and others. If you saw the recent photo of boxer Mike Tyson bewildered on his backside and the ropes...that is just how I like to leave my fellow debaters (wish old C.S. Lewis himself were around). Since you are my source of Catholic theology I had a couple of questions I hope you could answer which came to mind recently...especially since the new Pope seems conservative in the face of a clamor for changes (he

was the former head Guardian of Church Doctrine which used to be called The Inquisition). The first question I had was about evolution with which the Catholic Church agrees, as I read, though positing that at some point (unspecified) God inserted the human soul into the developing human being. This question surfaced in the current debate about “intelligent design” and “natural selection”. When do you think this soul was inserted? With Neanderthals or during their replacement by modern Cro Magnons. Or was it just plain and simply with Adam who very un- evolution like was just fashioned all at once. Though it sounds facetious I'm really interested in other viewpoints. As I told you before I am advancing a modern mysticism of secular scientific spirituality. Could a most illustrious Professor of Economics shed any light on this issue? The second question has to do with reproduction, a subject related to the above, and even more deeply pressing (excuse the pun). Since condoms and other forms of artificial birth control are forbidden (even by those with infectious disease), it is my understanding that what is permitted/recommended are abstinence (like in the priesthood), the rhythm method (highly erroneous) and coitus interruptus (and this only from the male organ/female organ intercourse and not by hand nor from other unmentionable orifices of the body, nor from the same sex partner, nor with any possible spilling of male seed except by accident in unspecified places). Dr.BEN do I have it right as to True Doctrine? Yesterday I saw a hooker (in Mexico they call them “Magdalenas” in Thailand “dok tong”) wearing a well tit- fronted T-shirt which was perfectly ironic yet perfectly placed in its wording and of which she undoubtedly had not the slightest knowledge of its meaning. In block letters it said “if you can't feed em, don't breed em”. Well advised to the world at large but not

to one religion which allows four wives and four concubines. As the religious far right says- “it's the secularists and socialists who fear a lack of abundance”. BEN please shed your wisdom upon me,

your friend,
Ricci



Carissimo Riccardo (...in Italian Ricci sounds gay!),

Apologies for answering late but we have been away for a few days. Your two burning questions are very important and fundamental. I have myself given thought to them in previous occasions, and I am happy to give you my personal answers as the possible beginning of an interesting electronic dialog (imagine if Plato had e-mails!). The problem is that I do not know exactly what the position of the Church is on these two questions, as I am not a Catholic theologian (you might send an e-mail to the new Pope, a renown theologian!). However, as a student of doctrine and as a rational being with solid Catholic foundations I think I have answers that may come quite close to the official stance of the Church. Your first question folds into the broader debate between evolutionists and creationists, a debate which I think is misleading and badly conducted both by the press and the media (at least in the U.S.). First, I think it is a great mistake to second-guess God's intentions and God's ways. For this reason, I think is no “scientific” contradiction between the evolutionary and the creationist explanation of life and the world, for the simple reason that an evolutionary mechanism CAN ALSO BE GOD'S

DESIGN. What the Bible says is simply that it took six “days” to create the world, but these days could correspond to evolutionary stages lasting billions or millions of years. After all, the Bible was written by and for people of 3000 years ago, and had to speak through analogies and concepts that could be understood then. Having said this, it is clear to me that it is not the evolutionary camp to be at fault but that particular (Southern Baptist Bible-belt) version of creationism that interprets the Bible description of creation as LITERAL TRUTH. If you accept the idea that the evolutionary explanation of the world is not NECESSARILY atheistic but can be consistent with God's existence and act of creation, then, the next question is how to reconcile this idea with the creation of MAN – which is the first of your burning questions. The answer you give is – in my humble opinion – right on spot: a Godless atheistic evolutionary theory cannot explain why, at some point in time (approximately around 40,000 years ago), the evolutionary line of ape-like “human” beings essentially disappeared and almost suddenly – practically from nowhere – the ENTIRE WORLD has been populated by our Cro-Magnon ancestors. There is no example in the animal kingdom of a species that remains the ONLY LIVING species of that family all over the world: for example, several species of felines and canines exist in various continents, often in peaceful coexistence. What happened to the other branches of the “human” evolutionary line? Why and how did the Neanderthals disappear? My answer is precisely that God on the last day of creation (say, 40,000 years ago) intervened on the evolutionary mechanism set in place several billion years earlier (the previous five “days”) and “created” the human race in the form of the Cro-Magnon. We do not know yet how this actually occurred, in that we

still do not know (in biological and anthropological terms) how the Cro-Magnon appeared: without wanting to second-guess God's ways, perhaps He intervened on a little known but already existing branch of the evolutionary "human" line, or created a new branch from scratch. Only many years of field research and "luck" will give us an answer. As a corollary to this interpretation, it is clear to me that headline claims that mankind is two million years old because some human-like ape bones were discovered here and there (recall the hoopla about "Lucy, the mother of all mankind") are misleading, and only self-serve the atheistic version of the evolutionary camp. As regards the second burning question, we have to postpone it because everything in the kitchen is beginning to burn (now for real!) and I must attend the stoves.

BEN



Caro BEN,

Thank you for your response which I have concisely called "ain't no damn monkey" or "on the sixth day God created Cro-Magnon". I waited for your promised answer to the second burning question to no avail. I fear you have even less spare time now than two years ago when you declined to answer that three page typed letter on religious problems (I still have a copy of that letter and it's not a bad piece of writing). Nor do I feel you have read one page of the books of recommendation you inquired about. Yet to quote you "the possible beginning of an interesting electronic dialog (imagine if Plato had e-mail!)". It's as if Mike Tyson got up and decided to go back to the fray

knowing he had the cool 5 million bucks even if he stopped and to go on would further deteriorate a punch-drunk palooka from becoming a missionary for his born again beliefs.

Since we have been friends for over twenty years I hope this letter will be taken gracefully. Concerning e-mail I have found them to be convenient but not good for study and reflection (they are also bad for the eyesight staring into an artificial light source). I always make print outs to study and annotate. I also keep a detailed diary and am constantly jotting down little quotes especially statistical data.

There is no question that you are a happier and more content man now than the un-reborn BEN (even if your time and freedom are diminished). It's said that one only becomes conservative when one has something to conserve. I'm wondering what epiphany event changed you to espouse Catholic doctrine and become what appears to be a "Creationist" and possibly the beginning of "proto-fundamentalism"? I presume your "espresso+vino quotient" is intact.

I so remember that afternoon under a big tree when you commented on my concept of a "chemical soul" (your words) and that religion was "as Marx said, the opiate" (again your words). It appears that maybe you, like most folks, have decided to, as it were, buy "long term religious life insurance", placing yourself on the side of the purported big boss in the sky with the promised payable dividend of Paradise and life ever after and with your loved ones to boot. It appears to me that this insurance policy must be paid for with a premium of intellectual

integrity.

This leads me to let you know that in my discussion with the senior Buddhist monk we have debated already the questions brought to your attention. I even once used your same response about a God's possible designing things to appear or happen in certain ways (the cosmos, life, evolution). This I referred to as “methodological intent” (note that there may also be methodological materialism or atheism, etc...and that doesn't mean I believe these or support them but they are philosophical problems). Also concerning Buddhism, of which you refer to rather flippantly, I must caution you that Buddhism and the Indian traditions from which it sprang are the big leagues of religious scholasticism, ultra serious in practice and thousands of years older than the Semitic desert religions. The Buddhist scripture and commentaries are hundreds if not thousands of times larger than the books comprising the Bible (even with the scores of Biblical books thrown out included).

That said, I must say that I have serious problems with the fine print of several Buddhist doctrines, enough so that I cannot call myself a Buddhist. I do find Buddhism and the Yoga traditions associated to be exceptional intellectual adventures in religion and much more believable than the unverified, hearsay accounts of supernatural and pie in the sky when you die accounts of the desert religion acolytes. It is a fact that Buddhism was the way of liberation attained by a Crown Prince (Siddhartha Gotama) and the desert religion acolytes were shepherds, carpenters, fisherman and caravan merchants (sorry, it's true). If you have ever been alone in a big desert with its big silence around you...you start to hear little voices in your

head...with a lot of silence and a bunch of voices you might believe someone was talking to you (the source of revelation).

Back to your letter of response before the cooking burned. One of the biggest problems in Philosophy is that of “other minds”. One can not have real understanding of what is fully contained in another's mind. I am truly boggled at the extent people take on a certain position (religion) simply because somebody else got to them first with a bill of particulars. Say the Philippines is Catholic because of the Spanish, Indonesia Islamic because of the Arabs, Tahiti Protestant because of the British before the French., etc. It appears only a fraction of people ever think of “how they know what they believe”.

You speak of the Bible being written for people of 3,000 years ago using “analogies and concepts that could be understood then”. Have you ever thought that your conception of a personal male father god in the sky could also be a 3,000 year old concept. I can assure you that religious scholars, often called theologians, even in your tradition have entertained widely differing notions of the God idea (maybe He made it that way). Unfortunately we see today the havoc again brought on by religious extremism. It really is the IV World War with the Western democracies pitted against the last of the desert religion theocracies. As they say it's still the opening salvos and there is a far out chance once going mass destruction they will cancel one another out. The Jews won't let us forget the 6 million Holocaust, the Soviets their loss of 27 million, and I won't let people forget the maybe 50 million killed in 300 years by the Catholic theocracy (sorry).

The things just listed above are for me enough proof of a lack of a personal creator God. Most pointedly today, the holiest of the holy, praying 5 times a day to your once a week are the most hideous examples of human perversion. The servants of God cutting off hands, feet, heads, stoning people to death, honor killings, bombings of every kind...all of which are performed while uttering "God is great". I could again remind you of the disgraced Priesthood – 10,000 molestations in 50 years, and the anti-everything zealots of faith especially in the Americas. All of these make me and most thinking persons shudder in disbelief at what is in others minds. Most of it is religious indoctrination or better, religious brainwashing. I and others want something better, something for the millennium in which we live, for all people, post-national oriented and without the pure Voodoo of organized religion. I have dedicated my life and work to that saving grace. And who's to say that God didn't make it that way? In the end the principle of natural selection will apply to religion...that which survives best to reproduce its own kind.

About your statement of the 6th day creation of Cro-Magnon...that is certainly a new one on me. He not only put a soul in but created the whole human race separate from its antecedents. Furthermore you throw out some biological terms not clearly stated. Its Kingdom, Phylum, Class, Order, Family, Genus, Species. The animal Kingdom includes insects, sponges, worms, etc., and for you to say "the only living species of that family [sic] all over the world" is not correct since you have eliminated Genus as well as the other classifications above family to Kingdom. What about sperm whales or other cetaceans all over the worlds oceans. I'm certain there are other

examples and I will query a biologist to further refute your statement.

Also I saw recent documentary about Neanderthals and it's believed they co-existed with modern Cro-Magnons for maybe 30,000 years and it is believed interbred. Can't you see some of them walking the Via Veneto? This replacement of Neanderthals was certainly not "almost suddenly-practically from nowhere" as you maintain. It was pure natural selection, by a better adapted to reproduce large bicameral brained homo sapiens in which the rudiments of secondary consciousness had been in development for hundreds of thousands of years. Please don't denigrate the science of genetics and evolutionary biochemistry which decidedly demonstrate common ancestral antecedents in the Genus Homo, Family Hominidae, Order Primate, Class Mammalia, Phylum Chordata, Kingdom Animalia.....(I not only looked these up again but I had studied pre-med courses in embryology, comparative anatomy, biochemistry and genetics). These evidences are the best we have and overwhelmingly are in agreement with the scientific community and must superceed any ideas of myth, hearsay and supernatural VOODOO.

Of course God could have made it all that way...

But I go for simplification (do you know the principle of Okkham's razor... do not complicate things beyond the simplest reliable explanation). We are it...it is us...that's all there is and always was; and what there is is infinitely in the process of experiencing and knowing itself. No beginning no end, one Big Bang after another, starburst to black -hole and back again...

Maybe that's the God that is...

Your friend,
Riccardo



Dear Richard,

Your last e-mails still touch upon the question of karma, and how our volitional actions reverberate (often with delayed echoes) throughout the world. In response to your query about the relationship between the teachings on Karma and Dependent Origination, they overlap to a great degree. The scope of the teachings on Dependent Origination covers the entire range of causality, or cause and effect. Its most simple equation is:

*When there is this, that is.
With the arising of this, that arises.
When this is not, neither is that.
With the cessation of this, that ceases.*

All conditioned things (everything on earth & the heavens) arise/exist because of causes. Nothing arises 'out of the blue', and if the supporting conditions change or vanish then the phenomenon they support must equally change or vanish.

The teachings on Karma touch upon all the repercussions (effects) of our volitional actions, both within our minds and the external environment. The two teachings overlap at the area that the Buddha paid most attention to: how our volitional deeds create suffering and compound ignorance. The teaching that focuses on this process is that of the twelve chains of Dependent Origination, a cyclical chain, but usually starting with avijja (ignorance) and ending with death and all forms of suffering. In this chain the second link, sankhara (volition), is synonymous with

karma. The area of study is less on the external environment, or even the death of the body, but on the psychological dynamics that reinforce craving and a sense of fixed identity.

As for Stream-entry, this does not come about by an act of will – certainly not by adopting a set of beliefs – but rather is the first irrevocable transformation resulting from realization, one can say the closest Buddhists come to an act of Grace.

Are there no such things as metaphysical laws? Wouldn't we otherwise be swimming in a sea of chaos? And isn't consciousness a form of energy, albeit a psychic one? In the end of the day even philosophers and prophets must rely on metaphor to build a bridge (speaking metaphorically of course) across the divide into the great Unknown.

Thank you for the letter to your BEN friend – how has he responded to your jibes?

I'm enclosing several articles: a newsletter, a pilgrimage account, and a recent submission to the parish magazine.

Best Wishes,
Ajarn

FROM AJARN

The Tittira Jataka tells the story of three friends; A partridge, a monkey, and an elephant. A dispute arises amongst them over who should be the senior, and who

should be given foremost respect. They decide to use age as the criterion, determining their respective ages in relation to a local Banyan tree. They recount their first memories as infants: The elephant had rubbed its underbelly on the tree, the monkey while sitting had nibbled the tree's highest branch, and the partridge remembered dropping the seed from which the tree sprouted. The partridge was thus chosen as the leader, and the three lived in harmony. This story is told in context of how lodgings and other requisites should be distributed among the monastic community, the Buddha setting the standard based on how long a monk has been ordained.

This hierarchy pervades our lives in the monastery, and requires a mental adjustment for those of us who have grown up in a society espousing independence and egalitarianism. Primarily, the hierarchy aims to simplify our lives and to cut through conceit. Every society is faced with organizing a form of governance, within the range of tyranny and anarchy. The worldly ideal most often presented in the scriptures is of the benign monarch, although a favorable report is given of the Vajjians, who banded as a confederate of republics. The Buddha claimed that the Vajjians would be invincible as long as they maintained seven condition of welfare, which included meeting and conducting their affairs in concord.

Within the monastic community various forms of decision-making and administration are used. Besides the aforementioned hierarchy, which deals with more practical matters, a form of democracy based on full consensus is implemented for more serious sangha issues (sanghakamma), for example ordinations. Similarly, the community can elect individuals to positions of authority,

permitting them to act as leaders and representatives.

As a parallel to the teaching for the Vajjians, the Buddha taught the conditions leading to prosperity and well-being (aparīhaniyadhamma) of the Sangha. Salient recommendations include: To meet, disperse, and perform duties in harmony; to honor and respect those elders of long standing; to delight in forest abodes; and to establish oneself in mindfulness. Rather than attach to a specific political system, the Buddha emphasized the cultivation of these principles to bring about true peace and concord.

Sanctity of Life

A couple of years ago I met some neighbors walking their dog, and they asked me whether in the Buddhist belief animals possess a soul. There is no simple answer to this question, which reminded me of the Zen koan, “Does a dog have Buddha-nature”? Regardless of our religious convictions on this matter, I believe we all recognize that animals share attributes with human beings beyond the basic instincts of hunger, aggression, and sexual drive. Anyone who has owned a dog, for example, has surely witnessed forms of memory and intelligence, and emotions ranging from deep affection, loyalty and joy, to grief, irritation and shame.

The Buddhist teaching affirm that animals are companions in samsara, the round of rebirths. They are relatives in old age, sickness and death. As sentient beings, they are to some degree conscious of their own existence, and like us they cherish life and fear death. Buddhism acknowledges that animals, unlike human beings, lack the faculties to

reflect upon the meaning of life; their consciousness is dimmed, and for the most part they are driven by instinctual urges. This is one reason why human life is so highly prized. The cardinal spiritual teaching on loving-kindness, however, exhorts us to include animals in our prayers, and to avoid injuring them whenever possible. An act of violence towards an animal, even for ostensibly beneficial ends, leaves a taint on the heart. To kill for pleasure, for example, requires that a person suppress empathy, which arises naturally when we live in a sensitive relationship to animals. Granted, Buddhism is a practical religion, and admits that we are often faced with choosing the better of two evils. If termites are eating our house, or mosquitoes spreading disease, some action may need to be taken that involves harming the creatures involved. But to use the extreme (yet sadly common) analogy of warfare, Buddhism does not contain a Just War theory: humans are never completely absolved from violence, whether this is perpetrated against other people or animals. The decision to violently defend oneself (not to mention aggress) will always yield some harmful repercussions. Our aim is, through skillful living, to minimize the damage we cause other beings.

*Whatever living beings there may be;
Whether they are weak or strong, omitting none...
May all beings be at ease.*

*Even as a mother protects with her life her only child,
So with a boundless heart
Should one cherish all living beings;
Radiating kindness over the entire world.
(The Buddha's words on Loving Kindness)*

The Jataka tales were composed as teaching tools to promote respect for animals. The story of Blackie the Bull is a case in point:

Long ago in India, some traveling merchants were lodging with an old woman, and to settle their accounts they gave her a young calf. The woman loved this calf and treated him like her own son, feeding him porridge and other fine foods. Due to his jet-black coat the bullock was nicknamed 'Granny's Blackie'. He grew to be the strongest bull in the village, but he was good-natured and would not mind when the local children pulled at his ears and horns, or jumped on his back.

The old woman was poor, and the bull sought a way to repay her kindness. One day a caravan of 500 wagons was passing, but due to the swollen river it was unable to cross the ford, even with its finest bulls. The caravan leader surveyed the local herd, and seeing Blackie he ordered his men to harness him. The caravan leader offered Blackie two silver coins for every wagon successfully delivered. After several hours and much toil Blackie managed to haul every wagon safely across the river. The caravan leader thanked him and hung a bag containing 500 coins around his neck. Blackie knew that he was being swindled, and refused to budge from the middle of the road. Only when he was given the full amount would he move, at which point he went home. The village children rushed to see what he was carrying but he chased them off and returned to the old woman.

The old woman was delighted to see him; she bathed and fed him, and together they lived happily for the rest of their days.

Although our relationship to animals is unique, it mirrors our relationship to nature in general. A true respect for living creatures springs from an understanding of our interconnectedness in the world. Our physical existence is dependent on our environment, including the food we eat and the air we breathe. Indeed, the cells of our bodies are continually dying and being regenerated from the surrounding elements. Our minds too are deeply influenced by our environment, whether it is clean and quiet, or polluted and chaotic.

Morally, nature is neutral; to rail against hurricanes, earthquakes, and epidemics is futile. Instead, we should observe and study these forces so that we can minimize danger and establish safety. It is worth bearing in mind, however, that although we can harness nature's forces we can never achieve a final mastery over nature. Our lives are always subject to limitation.

Human impact on nature falls within the domain of morality. We can use our intelligence constructively or destructively. A reckless, self-centered consumption of natural resources, for example, is unsustainable for the planet. An appreciation of our proper role, however, will steer us from an anthropocentric approach to one of stewardship. As a result of today's ecological crises, our primary responsibilities include conservation and restoration.

Besides the physical and general mental benefits, nature also plays a pivotal part in the spiritual life. We have probably all experienced the restorative potential of pristine wilderness. The Buddha encouraged his disciples to seek wild areas to foster an inner quiet, and to learn the

principle of impermanence as it unfolds in nature's cycles and rhythms. In this sense nature acts as a teacher, providing countless simple lessons from which we can learn and grow wise. The Buddha went so far as to say that the longevity of his dispensation hinges on adherents spending time in wild areas, especially forests. Many Monasteries engender rainforest projects to provide a sanctuary for all creatures, and to create a suitable environment for meditation.

We leave our homes to come and live in the forest and absorb the peace of mind it gives us. The Buddha praised living in the forest because physical and mental solitude is conducive to the practice for liberation. We come to practice in order for wisdom to arise. Here in the forest we can sow and cultivate the seed of wisdom. If we have learned to live in the forest, we can return and contend with the city and all the stimulation of the senses that it brings us. Learning to live in the forest means allowing wisdom to grow and develop. We can then apply this wisdom no matter where we go.

We should look around us and be observant, for everything in the world is ready to teach us. With even a little intuitive wisdom, we will then be able to see clearly through the ways of the world. We will come to understand that everything in the world is a teacher. Trees and vines, for example, can reveal the true nature of reality. From nature we can learn enough to be enlightened, because everything follows the way of truth. It does not diverge from truth.

(Ajahn Chah)

The word nature has many definitions. Occasionally, it is used to translate the Pali Dhamma, which refers to one of the three Buddhist 'Jewels': the Ultimate Truth. The connection between nature and truth is not a coincidence. Liberation from suffering occurs by gaining insight into the laws of nature. This knowledge does not come from outer space; on the contrary it arises by understanding the world, here and now.

Whether it is a tree, a mountain, or an animal, it's all Dhamma, everything is Dhamma. Where is this Dhamma? Speaking simply, that which is not Dhamma doesn't exist. Dhamma is nature. This is called the true Dhamma. If one sees nature, one sees Dhamma; if one sees Dhamma, one sees nature. Seeing nature, one knows the Dhamma.

(Ajahn Chah)



Caro BEN,

Apologies for going so hard in last e-mail. I think I underestimated (and because of your refusal to be offended in the first letter two years ago) your commitment to the superiority and finality of your religion in the face of my commitment to exposing the non superiority and non finality of any religion. A Pyhrric victory is one costly or lost in the end (as in friendship). On the other hand a Carthaginian victory is one in which all participants are dead. (as in ??????). Statistically 64% of Americans (more so Italians) believe God created humans directly, like your view, even without any evolution. So you are, my friend, in the majority. To be able to approach my view one must be looking from a

distance and without any ties to a particular society, family, or institutional religion. The old saying.....”seeing the forest from the trees”. It also helps to have studied and looked all around the subject. The history of religion from an anthropological, sociological, and psychological perspective. To know from whence they came. Traveling to the differing regions and witnessing the fervor with which each religious group (none excluded here!) holds their particular creed above all others (though often publicly expressing an ecumenism). When it gets down to basics it's always “my guy is better than your guy”.

I remain a truly religious person, in the original sense of that word “religion” to tie, or unite (same as yoga meaning to yoke oneself). Buddha told his followers to go to the wild forests and Jesus said to worship in one's closet and not the temple .I don't need books to follow, old men in funny costumes/ hats with big threats, big rules, and even bigger promises of the biggest far fetched things to come. If religion is the opiate...I have sought the inside dope.

I shared the letter “ain't no damn monkey” with the Buddhist monk. He wanted to know your response. I told him it was a Latin way of heated discussion, as alive today as at the Roman Forum or the Renaissance plazas. What shall I tell him?

Abbracci,
Riccardo



Dear Ajarn,

Thanks for the invitation. It would be a pleasure to have tea with you. I hope it could be just the two of us so we could talk freely.

I was planning to write you concerning the last letter etc. I am now living back in Ranong in the south of Thailand where I was living when I first started these e-mails. My room in Bangkok (now I call it Bangcough) had its rent raised and lots of construction began nearby and the air on the streets just became intolerable. I like to walk about and it became impossible to do so without a cloud of black fumes from a bus, a tuk tuk or motorcycle befouling my nostrils and lungs.

In Ranong I'm back living in a small bungalow right on/above a nice jade colored river. It's very isolated but a road passes at my front porch. The sound of the trucks passing is mostly drowned by the rushing waters below and the nights are simply magnificent. Surrounded by a thick old growth National Forest I feel at home in Nature. There are nice hot spring baths, elephant rides and of course a few Wats. A giant king cobra slithered its 5 meter length below my balcony to say hello. And I have adopted a stray puppy dog who is my only companion as the nearest neighbors are up the road.

Concerning the last e-mail to my friend BEN, he wrote me that he enjoyed my comments and had started to reply a few times but was stopped by commitments. He's now a father of two and is finishing a book for a hounding publisher and all sorts of other things which only artists and monks (and artist-monks) can cheerfully avoid.

I go to Bangcough every month for a couple of days for mail, art matters, and re-supply with things I can't get in Ranong. Could we plan on meeting Saturday 7 January in the afternoon? If this is convenient for you please e-mail me a confirmation and a time for me to come. I could call you the day before, 6 January, to re-confirm.

I had some new questions for discussion which maybe we could go over in our meeting. I wanted to know just what is the Theravada position on the human evolution issue. I know that intelligent design for a Buddhist is held to be a purely natural process of cause and effects which, because they are infinite, are infinitely able to come together in complex/evolved ways. But concerning the broader issue of human development occurring over a million years of human like descent. Was there volition? Was karma the generating force to a more complex (sometimes called "higher" evolved) animal species? It is important to bear in mind that Darwinian Natural Selection is NOT a theory of how life began...but a theory of how a multitude of varying species came about.

So hoping to get your confirmation, I'll wish you good things for the Christmas fest and the New Year (this is Chinese year of the dog).

Best regards,

Richard (TEASE) and "Skunky" (my dog friend)



FROM AJARN

A great warrior possesses four attributes: He is skilled in the martial arts, he shoots far, he is an expert marksman, and he is capable of destroying a mighty horde. Similarly, an adept Dhamma practitioner is of upright conduct, comprehends impermanence, and the Four Noble Truths, and pierces the thick mass of ignorance. This passage from the Gradual Sayings is one of the few occasions when the Buddha, not wishing to glorify warfare, uses the analogy of a soldier. The term for the vital spiritual faculty of energy – viriya – stems from the Indo-European root *vir*, denoting power, courage and vanquishment. A *vira* is an illustrious warrior. Kindred English words include *virile*, *virtuoso*, and *virtue* (formerly meaning 'valor'). When unbridled this energy is raw life-force, driving towards its desired object without fear of consequence. For it to be a wholesome spiritual quality it must be harnessed, and balanced with other faculties. Then it becomes synonymous with *samma-vayama* – right effort. *Viriya* is included in numerous teachings, e.g., the Five Powers (*bala*), the Four Steps To Success (*iddhipada*), the Seven Enlightenment Factors (*bojjhanga*), and the Ten Perfections (*paramita*), within which the counterbalancing qualities are made clear. Without wisdom, for example, misdirected effort is like pressing gravel for oil, milking a cow by the horns, churning water for butter, or rubbing wet sticks for fire. Another simile the Buddha used is that of holding a quail: with an excess of energy we risk gripping the quail too tightly and suffocating it; with a deficiency of energy the quail escapes. With an extreme imbalance we become vengeful – *vera* (grammatically, a strong form of *vira*). Striking the correct equilibrium, on the other hand, is compared to playing a finely tuned lute –

we produce beautiful music. More importantly, the development of equilibrium is the path to self-mastery. To properly tune our instruments we must draw on our experiences, and to learn to live with paradox, as expressed in the Latin proverb *festina lente* – 'hasten slowly'.

*Though one should conquer a million men in battle,
One is indeed the greater conquerer
who has conquered himself.*

(Dhammapada 103)



Caro Riccardo,

First of all my best wishes for a Happy New Year and that all your plans and dreams may come true (which of course they usually do not). Very diplomatically, I am writing to you after Christmas to avoid sending you – supposedly a Buddhist – wishes for a Merry Christmas. Ah! I am belatedly answering (but in Italy we say better late than never!) your famous e-mail “ain't no damn monkey” - as usual, erudite, witty, very entertaining and...a little punchy (I can see that your Italian blood sometimes takes over the Buddhist teaching of peaceful behavior and tolerance!). You “accuse” me of not responding to your letters as quickly as you (and I) would like, but it's easy for you to say so while laying on a soft longchair by the seaside, surrounded by lush tropical vegetation, at the edge of a lily-filled pond of fresh spring waters, a girl fanning you with imperial palm leaves, and another girl clipping your toenails...Whereas I am here slaving 24/7 to change diapers, cooking two meals a day for four, solving

theorems, chopping wood for the winter, editing a never-ending book, picking zucchini from the vegetable garden (not in winter, though), watering plants, shopping, driving the children and their mama to the beach or to school, singing soothing night songs to them (mama included) so they can close their pretty eyes and finally give daddy a few minutes of rest around 11 pm! And you ask me that after all this I should find time to ponder ponderous questions, read heavy books, make notes, reflect and meditate, and come up with interesting, well carved answers to quench your thirst for spiritual satiation. Not to mention the responsibility you charge me with: sometimes I wonder whether you are (perhaps unwillingly or unconsciously) hoping that by corresponding with me on religious matters you'll find in my answers the right argument and the right perspective to push you back toward rediscovering your Catholic roots!...A result that would be indeed miraculous and quite rewarding for both of us.

Here is how I would like to address some of the many points and issues raised in your e-mail. First, you “accuse” me of a lack of intellectual integrity because in my youth I endorsed Marx' opinion about religions, while now in my old age I have become religious just to gain a longterm “life insurance” (or better a “beyond-life insurance”). I think you missed the point. Intellectual integrity is not keeping your opinion stubbornly fixed and unchanged in the face of life events and occurrences that may suggest alternative views, but it is exactly the contrary: the courage to accept that your opinions can be wrong or incomplete or affected by psycho-emotional contingent problems and that, therefore, they are always liable to be questioned, doubted, and possibly changed. Intellectual

integrity is the courage to admit error and accept change. That's why it is so lacking among economists and, more generally, among modern scientists – the main culprit being, in my modest opinion, the fact that nowadays there are such large monetary rewards to reap in sciences, in addition to fame among peers, that make the act of admitting error too risky. Look, for example, at the debate about global warming: those scientists who – too hurriedly – suggested and/or endorsed global warming ten years ago have great difficulties in admitting even the possibility that most of the ongoing climate change might have natural causes. With the consequence – directly linked to the lack of integrity – that the debate immediately assumes a “political” (or “religious”) dimension, where the truth is no longer sought by means of scientific investigation but it is established beforehand according to one's “color”. (On this issue much more later). My impression is that you confuse intellectual integrity with “pride” which, as you may remember from your teen-age Catechism lessons, is the “father of all sins” (on this issue you may read the short and very enjoyable book “Mere Christianity” by C.S. Lewis). Of course, my stance on intellectual integrity does not mean that you should endorse the extreme opposite of changing your opinions at the whim of the wind or of the fads. You must be firm in your ideas but also ready to admit error when new arguments or proofs or empirical evidence suggest otherwise. Then the fundamental question is: does this advise apply to faith as well? My answer is “I don't think so”: faith is not an opinion, it is not the conclusion of a logical argument, it is not the result of an empirically recognized event (even though miracles are often used by the Church to reinforce faith). And this applies if you hold Catholic beliefs or the beliefs of any other religion, Buddhism included (after all, no one has

demonstrated the Buddhist belief that we are continuously reborn in new forms and that everything flows without end).

Second, when you talk of a “life insurance” for afterlife you miss another point: an insurance is a cover against “accidents”, i.e. against occurrences of events that are beyond your control, and that are regulated by laws of probability. But “gaining Paradise” is not an event regulated by laws of probability: God is not a wheel of fortune! On the opposite, when God created us he gave us the greatest of all gifts, the “free will” of deciding our actions, or discerning between good and bad, of understanding our responsibilities. It follows that “going to hell” (the damaging event which the “life insurance” for afterlife is supposed to cover) is not an “accident” but the consequence of our own decisions and actions. But then, if it is not an accident, what's the insurance for?

Third, your point about Buddhism being thousands of years older than Semitic desert religions, and that Buddhist doctrines are more believable than the “hearsay accounts” of desert people because in the loneliness of the desert you are more prone to remain a victim of “little voices in your head”, seem to me rather empty. The quest for divinity (whether pluri or mono) has been (and still is) a constant of all mankind: among Etruscan farmers, Phoenician seafarers, Greek sculptors, Maya coffee growers, desert caravan merchants, Korean fisherman; all these many different forms and variations. Your point that the doctrine of one religion is more believable than of others simply because it is “older” thus makes no sense. And so does your point that the form taken by one religion is preferable to others simply because it developed among

non-desert people. In fact, on a higher level, if the quest for divinity is a natural aspiration of all mankind, why establish rankings among the various forms that this quest has taken – especially when each form becomes ingrained with the cultural and historical identity of each community? But the problem is bigger than that, as you have rightly pointed out; it touches on a “perverse use” of religion. Being an important part of the cultural identity of each community, religion becomes the first target in man's attempt to subjugate other men – an ally in any strategy of oppression. Eliminate the cultural symbols, the traditions, the gods of one community and soon you get a powerless despondent people laying at your feet. I have no excuse for this perverse use of religion – of ANY religion – but you can't fault God or the gods for that. Millions of people killed (falsely) in the name of God, thousands of molestations by priests, a culture of hatred and revenge for terrible events that occurred centuries ago, the bigots and the fundamentalists, are not proof of a lack of a creator God, as you put it. Once again, we go back to the central question of “free will”: God did not create robots, who always do good because they are programmed to do so. Instead, God created man in “his image” - meaning that man was given one of the greatest of God's attributes, the attribute of deciding his own course of action. (Within this scheme, animals are not supposed to have received this gift; they only act according to their most immediate needs – whether it be hunger, thirst, reproduction. Some theologians partly dispute this position, allowing the possibility that higher-order animals may also be guided by compassion, sorrow, need for sociality, down-to-earth playfulness. But this possibility is certainly denied to, say, bees, worms, lice – and in any case does not reach the deeper levels of decisions about good and bad). On this

argument, I would suggest you to read the first chapter of “Sophie's World”, a very well received novel written about ten years ago by a Norwegian novelist.

Your point about Indonesians being Muslim and Philippines Catholic as a result of religious indoctrination is well taken, but once again you don't seem to want to separate the perverse use of religion by man with the quest for divinity and spirituality in most of all of us. Your dream of a non-organized religion that avoids indoctrination and blood shedding is bound to fail not because God does not exist – or exists only in a “feel-good” version – but because mankind is what it is. That's where the “revelation” comes in: God is unhappy with his own creation, the gift of free will has been misused by mankind and has taken it on an unacceptable tangent of aggressiveness, blood-shedding, bad behavior, abuses – the works. He then decides to act “again”, to intervene in the course of history to change things around, by first revealing himself to the Hebrews, and then – having his strategy failed mostly because the Hebrews took this revelation as an “exclusive” gift of God to them and not as a mission to spread his words among the rest of mankind – by sending his own Son made man. That's why I don't find “surprising” that God has already acted in earlier times to “fix” the spring of evolution. If you believe in the God that I have just described (the biblical God as we know it), there is no argument that makes this God irreconcilable with the scientific observation/discovery of the evolutionary mechanism. Of course, you shouldn't take me too literally (as you probably did, with added sarcasm to boot...): I can't and do not want to second-guess God and his ways. I am only saying that, from a mere human prospective, accepting evolutionism does not

automatically implies denying the existence of God.

This conclusion takes me to another fundamental problem that has embittered the history of the Catholic church (among others), but that – once again – originates exclusively from the fallible, insecure nature of man (and of the priests in particular). The problem that took the greatest and most known manifestation in Galileo's trial: the ill-conceived attempt by the church (I write it now with “small c” to emphasize its human, fallible nature) to defend/prove the existence of God by means of certain interpretations of the natural world – to the extent that when these interpretations are dismissed by new observations, new technologies, new theories, the church engages itself in a useless battle “against modernism”. In Galileo's trial the central point was the God's existence and his love for mankind (a specific doctrine of Catholicism) were “proved” by the Ptolemaic theory that the Earth (the seat of mankind) was at the center of the universe. You remove this centrality, you remove the proof! What a mess! The relevant question in fact is: why does the church periodically put itself into these traps? Why attach the defense of your doctrine on contingent, factual, historical interpretations of the natural world that may well be overcome in time to come? An identical Galileo's trial problem – this time more on the Protestantism side than one the Catholic side (I guess they learned their lesson!) - is the debate creationism-evolutionism: a debate which, as I have already noted in my previous e-mails, makes no sense to me – or at least what makes no sense to me is the attempt to deny evolutionism not through scientific inquiry but because of the pre-cooked self-referred truth that what the Bible says is true. But then, the issue becomes the truth of the Bible as a document and not the

truth of God's creation!

In sum, my suggestion of the 6th day creation of Cro-Magnon was partly made “tongue-in-cheek” (even though I think it's pretty cool). My point – did you miss this one too? - was more to underline a flaw in the debate than in contributing a specific theory by which evolutionism could be reconciled with God's creation. In this sense, whether man is the only species in his genus – or maybe there is a worm in Australia that shares the same record – is irrelevant. Although I think it is true that among the primates man has only distant cousins and no brudders. In the end, the question “where did Neanderthals go” is a relevant question but one which I am not prepared to answer for lack of knowledge in the related disciplines – a lack of specific knowledge that, however, does not prevent me from making a contribution of method.

I've got to go now. I know I have addressed only a few of the points you raised, and for sure I haven't proved to you God's existence. Maybe the order by which I addressed these points is not the most efficient, but perhaps one day I will be able to re-order my thoughts in a more “logical” format. For the time being, we can continue our e-mail dialog (every six months?); my hope is that the intellectual stimuli I receive from your critiques will help me understand better the nature of my relation with God.

A big hug from your friend, and Felice Anno Nuovo BEN



Caro BEN,

Thank you for your e-mail with such thoughtful commentary from a dear and illustrious friend. I am currently staying in a nature reserve with lots of trees and water and have a wild animal for house guest hence the becoming of “fuzzy, cuddliness”. It is however difficult to get to an Internet system working and available so this letter to you may be cut short and continued again in a few days.

Your comments are appreciated and this dialog gives me not only mental stimulation but I'm using the information as sort of cross examination with the issues discussed with the Buddhist monk. It is my hope that you will, as you said, find the critiques stimulating for your religious convictions. In the last letter I detected considerable disagreement and misunderstanding, due most likely to your busy schedule and the reading off the glowing goldfish bowl computer screen. I shall enumerate these difference further on in this letter.

Your accolade of the e-mail “ain't no damn monkey” was appreciated... “as usual, erudite, witty, very entertaining, and a little punchy”. I like that and want to use it for an endorsement of any future publication or art show. Sorry but we live in the age of intellectual appropriation, slippery free tray agreements and I never promised you a rose garden!

About being punchy I should point out that Dr. BEN set the tone of these letters over three years ago with the punch filled line “let's sit and talk about God and your depressing, minimalist attitude”. Your words, and I have

them in print, just as I have printed all the e-mails for study. These include the equally famous letter “Il Cabala Della Schmuckioni” wherein it was left to fuzzy Riccardo to search the library and find it was the then Lord of the Admiralty Winston Churchill who garnered the first Western oil lease in Mid East Iran, thus beginning the economic blackmail catastrophe of today.

All of the above and what immediately follows is merely a lead- in to the main body of this current letter with more to follow.

Since it hasn't been understood by busy you that I am not a Buddhist but formulating along with others a modern mysticism of secular scientific spirituality I shall start with three statements by a philosopher, an artist and a scientist. Sure to provoke synaptic chaos and excitement in your cranium.

Fuzzy, cuddly Riccardo posits that a real religion is composed of philosophy, art, and science.

“This is the difference between us Romans [philosophers] and the Etruscans [theists], and the reason for their inability to take charge of themselves and change. We Romans believe that lightning is caused by clouds colliding, whereas they believe that clouds collide in order to create lightning. Since they attribute everything to gods, they are led to believe not that events have a meaning because they have happened, but that they happen in order to express a meaning.”

Seneca

“I was like Robinson Crusoe on the island of Tobago. For

hours at a stretch I would lie in the sun doing nothing, thinking of nothing. To keep the mind empty is a feat, a very healthful feat too. To be silent the whole day long, see no newspapers, hear no radio, listen to no gossip, be thoroughly and completely lazy, thoroughly and completely indifferent to the fate of the world is the finest medicine a man can give himself. The book learning gradually dribbles away, problems melt and dissolve, ties are gently severed, thinking, when you deign to indulge in it, becomes very primitive; the body becomes a new and wonderful instrument, you look at plants or stones or fish with different eyes, you wonder what people are struggling to accomplish by their frenzied activities; you know there is a war on but you haven't the faintest idea what it's about or why people should enjoy killing one another”.

Henry Miller

“In the quest to decipher the evolution of the cosmos no topic generates greater interest among scientists than 'dark energy', the mysterious force that appears to be causing the universe to expand at an ever accelerating rate. New research based on analysis of gamma ray bursts detected as far away as 12.8 billion {yes billion} light years away suggest that the force 'dark energy' exerts may have varied over time. This finding casts doubt on the validity of Einsteins Cosmological Constant.” [evidence of more big bangs...Riccardo]

Dr. Bradley Schaefer, astronomer, Louisiana State Univ.

That's enough of a starter...more to follow next e-mail.

Abbracci,
Riccardo



Dear Riccardo,

Thank you very much for your e-mail and quotations. I found Seneca's and Miller's particularly illuminating, but what do they have to do with modern mysticism of secular scientific spirituality? And, pray, what is that differentiates the “modern” mysticism of secular scientific spirituality from the “old” mysticism of secular scientific spirituality?

Oh, by the way, don't you think the last quotation should be more properly associated with modern mysticism of “empirical” scientific spirituality, also known with the acronym of modern MESS!

Saluti e abbracci

BEN



Caro BEN,

Thanks for the rapid fire retort. But did you not understand that I'm having trouble finding computer time hereabouts and I'll have to write in pieces – maybe several e-mails to finish all to be said this time.

I think your publisher is happy I'm tickling your tortellini so you hurry and finish your book so as to put more time into our discussion.

Thanks for your last e-mail but just wait and I'll explain. Your witty and somewhat punchy acronym “MESS” for “modern empirical scientific spirituality” I'm sure sent you

snickering out to your zucchini garden. Sorry but the statement is redundant because science is synonymous with empiricism and I shall contrast this with many people's "made up spiritual hearsay" or "MUSH".

It is my intent (but with many e-mails) to "make sense of the MESS" and to "flush the MUSH".

Concerning the three quotes I sent you, these shall be addressed in due time. Do you know about the Koan in Zen? Furthermore when teaching Econ. 1A you talk differently than at a Grad. Seminar in Macroeconomics. Finally, when you go fishing from your yacht you throw chum to attract the fish. All this is to in a way disorient you and bring about "beginners mind".

Missionaries do something like this by first threatening a potential convert calling to mind the subjects sinful behavior and then showering them with the "good news". Incidentally I like the Buddhist thought that "ignorance" is a better term than "sin" and they have no concept of Satan which the Hebrews picked up from the Zoroastrians during Babylonian captivity. Having no belief in an afterlife until 200 BC, the Hebrews probably got that during the same period. Stoicism is important to my religion because it considers Nature to be as God or first cause and it originally was non dualist, mind being only a finer degree of matter. Zeno, its founder sought to combine the best of Plato, Aristotle and Heraclitus. Possibly Zeno had some contact with Buddhist ideas from missionaries in Greek colonies in the near East. It is recorded that Alexander had encountered a naked yogi Brahmin during expeditions about 300 B.C.. Though Buddhism is philosophically dualist (mind and matter)

there are many passages in Stoic writings which sound Buddhist-like. The quote is from Seneca and serves to discriminate between a naturalist and a theist interpretation of happenings; the cause leads to an effect--not the reverse. Of course this gets back to our discussion of evolution where we both stated that an all powerful God could have made things appear to happen through a natural process. More later on Stoicism.

The Miller quote calls to mind the state of emptiness and wonder necessary for any profound spiritual or mystical awareness. I can't think of any sage who did not seek this kind of solitude and mind set.

The quote about the dark energy challenge to Einstein seems to indicate that the expansion of the universe is not constant but variable, and being thus, may be evidence for not only one Big Bang (as theists proclaim). I believe it will someday be shown that there were many or infinite Big Bangs and other universes (Buddhism posits this). Steven Hawking thinks similarly. And that figure 12.8 billion light years away...why would any God make it so big for this tiny earth...and isn't it arrogant for humans to think, as some do, that it was all made for them. Don't forget the dinosaurs had the earth for 200 million years, Neanderthals had it for 200,000 years and modern man for a measly 30,000 years. A "thinking religion" has to consider these things...the infinite space...the infinite time.

Back to the follow up to "ain't no damn monkey". Your letter was peppered with many statements from your religion such as:
"God created us"
"pride as father of all sins"

“gaining paradise”
“gift of free will”
“going to hell”
“in His image”
“revealing Himself to Hebrews”
“sending His son as man”
etc.

I don't know if you've ever had a philosophy class but these kind of statements would cause you to be made into chopped- pepperoni by the sharp -tongued philosophy classmates. People with these views usually were found in the back of the class with furrowed brow and tails between their legs. Articles of ones particular faith should be identified as such and not brandished as philosophical peccadilloes.

Here I have to interject two news clippings which may function as the three closing quotes from the last e-mail to you.

From the Chicago Tribune-- “Jesus' existence to be ruled on by Italian court”. An atheist Luigi Cascioli has gone to court saying the Church has violated the Italian Penal Code articles 661 and 494 involving fraud, abusing popular credulity, and deception of the public through the use of “Imaginary characters”. Cascioli wants court appointed scholars to pore over the historical evidence for Jesus' existence. (there is none). For the facts go to www.geocities.com/paulntobin/Jesus.html

From Reuters Rome-- “Italy taps porn industry to fill coffers”. Italy's cash strapped government is to impose an additional levy of 25% on all income from pornography, bringing an expected 300 million Euros next year”. It

seems porno is thriving, particularly pay-TV porn, and this in the shadow of the Vatican and the Catholic brink of Hell because all those practices in porn are not sanctioned by the church. Why are so many Italians living in sin? This gets back to that second burning question of a previous e-mail regarding sexual activities allowed by the Church (it was the more pressing question remember). As a rejoinder... all these practices are not only allowed in Riccardo's religion but they are equally espoused! I say "orgasms for everyone", they're healthful and a Nature/God-given right...whenever, however, and with whomever one chooses...as long as it's consenting and being mindfully considerate of others.

One final thought before breaking this e-mail again... I'm not an atheist... The existence of God cannot be proven...nor can the non-existence be proven...the honest approach is agnosticism...admit one cannot know...just get rid of the MUSH, the stupid and dangerous and divisive MUSH...FLUSH THE MUSH!

Next time I'll get to the subject of Intellectual Integrity and the saving of ones "precious mozzarellas".

Until soon,
friendly,
Riccardo



Dear Ajarn,

Hello and hope you are returned to your Monastery after travels, I think you must have received the messages I sent

to my friend in Italy?

I am writing you in much heart brokenness as the little dog friend I cared for during three months was killed in the road this morning.

As I expressed to you at our meeting in Bangkok, I wanted to give that little dog some human kindness in taking him in and “helping him on his way”.

I the lonely yogi, Stoic philosopher fell in love with him. Though I showered him with love he gave to me much, much more.

It had been ten years since my last dog friend died and after sleeping at my feet for 11 years, every night.

Skunky was with me for three months and I think he was about 6 months old. He was just too wild and loved people too much, probably because I loved him too much. He could not resist running over the road to greet or play with someone no matter what the danger.

At first I resisted the dogs attraction, just offering him food outdoors, Then came the ball playing and the running crazy and swimming with me in the river below. I was hooked.....

Knowing the ever present danger in the road I hoped to never see or hear an accident....

I was indoors and heard his sad goodbye...short and rather painless...I don't think he knew what hit him.

But I had to go outside, see his limp dog- body with the red scarlet blood from the tongue that had said hello that morning. I had to bury him and make offering with a bonfire and incense at the spirit house. I have to mourn the loss of a friend, a good friend, a good dog.....

I loved him.

I guess I failed in the “exercise of non attachment”....truly to love is to suffer. The love companionship and good times we had were, I think, worth it. I'm trying to make sense of my actions and fill a hole in my heart.

You probably hear lots of human stories like these.

If you have anything to offer, please do.

Best regards,
Richard



Dear Richard,

Yes, I am, enjoying the peace and stillness of winter. The trip to Thailand was delightful but also plain full so I'm happy to have some time for retreat.

I can feel for you with the death of your dog companion. While living in Thailand I had to practice strict self-control not to shower affection on the neglected monastery dogs, often unsuccessfully. The Thais see such affection towards dogs as an aberration, but I didn't mind, for dogs can truly be devoted and sensitive friends. As for the grief

in separation, remember non-attachment is not an exercise – it is the expression of true understanding and love. You probably know of the story about Chiang Tzu, who was found singing in the bathtub after his wife died, not because he didn't love her but because he embraced death with as much honesty as he did life. Grief and sorrow are the sticky webs remaining from unexamined holding on; but these emotions become our teachers – they fill us with energy and require that we accommodate them somehow. Can we love our sorrow?

I carried your painting back and have found a suitable place in our guest-room to hang it.

Peace,
Ajarn



Dear Ajarn,

I am writing to share another soi dog story, maybe offer some insights, and to mitigate my grief.

Skunky was about 3 months old when I first encountered him at an upcountry roadside. Effusive with the energy of a wild puppy he grabbed at my pants leg as if begging for attention, a handout, or who knows what.

Residing in Thailand for several years it is easy for one to become indifferent to the common stray “soi dogs” both in cities and countrysides. Most of these unfortunates are mange-ridden or lame or unfriendly or all of these. I have been bitten a few times and only two weeks before

meeting Spunky I had been attacked by two huge Rottweiler guard dogs untethered.

Though I had owned and adored three different dogs in the past, it had been ten years since my last one died. Residing in Thailand I live alone, the typical expat; self-contained, friend challenged, and with a somewhat gnarly remembrance of things past.

And here was Skunky brimming with a puppy's enthusiasm for life, love and lets get going. He was fresh in life, white coated with asymmetrical black patches reminding me on the pinto ponys favored by the Souix. His tail was half as long as his body and he couldn't resist chasing after it. Most remarkable was his longish black snout which fronted two quizzical eyes and the damnedest eyebrow markings of light color which took the shape of an expression of "I'm sorry" or maybe "What...me worry"?

My only thought was to save this puppy from the dangerous roads for just a couple of feet away roared vehicles of every description up to and including 16 wheeled trucks. The first day of our meeting I slinked away, asked at a nearby restaurant if they wanted the dog, then returned to my bungalow nearby.

That night I thought of that dog on the road...I thought of a dream I had had recently involving a dog...I thought of a toy dog I had found...I thought of the Rottweiler attack...I thought of the Chinese year of the Dog. At that point I made the fateful choice to rescue the puppy at the roadside. I chose to follow the little voice inside me... call it destiny...or my daemon...or a demon...or karma...or

maybe these things could have been within that dog acting upon me.

Whatever the reasons I had set in motion for myself a new canine love-dance. My little-piece of-nature friend and emotional crutch would fill me with glee, with purpose, with gratitude, with wonder and expectation.

I vowed to not get “attached”, just give the little guy a few weeks of human kindness then set him free somewhere or find someone to take him.

The next several weeks brought back to mind all the wonderful times I had had with my dogs in the past. Skunky was a wild chain-saw jawed beast but filled with love for every person who happened by. I had to lovingly swat him to try and keep him from playing near the road that also fronted my bungalow. I laughed every time I went to collect the myriads of paper, rubber shoes, plastic cups and all from the scrounging he did constantly at the roadside.

He loved to wrestle and to play fetch. I loved to watch him run and always want for more. One day he got bit by the neighborhood bully-dog, an injury which left him with a slight limp on a rear leg. Then he got clipped by a motorcycle, a close call that I thought would keep him alert in the road. I thought of chaining him but knew he liked to run free and wild. I bought him a collar for Chinese New Year I said to myself this was to protect him from a neck bite from the bully-dog and not because he had become “my Dog”. His coat became glistening with health after a diet few soi dogs ever experience- sardines in tomato sauce, roast chicken and bones, milk, spaghetti,

chocolate chip ice cream, and every morning, banana slices. As Skunky grew to twice his size I began taking him down to the river below the bungalow. I was a bit fearful because I had seen an enormous king cobra there weeks before. It was just thrilling to see Skunky running hell-bent up and down the shore and rocks, swimming back and forth across the river, then mad dash back to me at the call of my whistle. The river play did it...I was in love with that mutt...as much as I have ever loved anything or any one. Only someone living alone, well past mid-life, in a foreign land and seeking solitude and quiet in the country could make such a statement, believe such a thing, and act that way.

I once had an elderly mentor friend, a wild man type, who told me in all sincerity that he had “never met a man as good as a dog”. Only dog lovers can begin to appreciate that statement. I have seldom if ever witnessed such pure unconditional love a dog gives and with sheer joy of living at all times and for all things.

Weeks and months passed at my happy bungalow. I learned Skunky's different ways of barking; in fun chasing his tail or a frog, or in shallow anger at a stranger passing, and in fear if the bully-dog chased him. I heard him scratch the front door for my attention and bang his food bowl with abandon for dinner. I saw his first puppy erection and he exhibited this show of affection not only to me but to neighbors, and visitors. He had great love for people, and it was his nature to do so coupled with the love I showed to him.

I said to myself many times that the “few weeks of human kindness” had been returned to me from him in even

greater abundance. Now somewhat confident of his security I returned from town at night or trips to Bangkok to eagerly find his crazy-love welcome. He was supremely happy and so was I.

Then it happened one early morning...what I had feared...what I thought I had prepared myself for. The bitter squeal cut off...I hoped it was the bully-dog...it wasn't. There just inside the cruel road lay his white limp dog- body.

As I went to him, two men walking across the road turned with knowing smiles. I felt Skunky had gone to greet them and didn't make it back. I picked him up and yelled to him, "Skunky I loved you". From the mouth that had greeted me that morning, now red dog-blood dripped on my arm. I buried my good friend of three months. A rock on his grave site reads, "was love killed the beast".

All of us have been wounded with the death of a loved one at some time. The older we get we think ourselves somewhat accustomed to that pain of separation, maybe even protecting ourselves by withholding our love. One may become more interested in one's religious teachings, may even become a monk to perfect a life of liberation from suffering, or may study philosophy to formulate a personal "coming the terms with mortality".

Death is above all else the "wake up call" that reminds each of us where we stand and how far we have yet to go.

Though I thought of myself as stoic and well grounded in Buddhist teachings, even fancied myself as a scientific naturalist pantheist...I must admit to being deeply hurt by

the death of my soi-dog. He was only 6 months old, the picture of everything beautiful, loving and happy, I had to re-view my thinking, my actions, my grieving. And all of this for a soi dog. All of my Thai friends and several Buddhist monks were uniformly dismissive of the event which I considered tragic. “Never mind”, “he’s all right” or “get another dog”, “look for the lesson” and “the wheel of samsara (re-birth) is same for us and dogs”. My distress over the dog was politely received yet thought of as deviant by Thai society. I felt “spiritually weak” even lost face as I lost tears in their presence. I had to leave my beautiful bungalow for all the reminders of twelve weeks of bliss with Spunky.

The older I get the more unsure I feel about all conceptions of ultimate reality. Our best science findings and my common sense cry out for a completely purposeless and unjust flow of events. Our existence the result of an infinitude of changing patterns of energy/matter interacting eternally, giving rise to complex self-organized emergent and contingently determined living systems. In other words...what there is...is us (people as well as dogs)...and that whatever there is always was and always will be. “Thou art that” in the words of ancient Indian sages. We are temporary aggregates separated from the greater whole allowed a period as our lives in which to experience and reflect upon that reality. This is so simple a dog might agree.

Most humans are not satisfied with the above conception and postulate further, especially to assuage pain, suffering and death inherent in any sensate being separate from the whole. Through the ages various systems have developed with some transcendent hierarchy of a God, Spirit, Tao,

etc., which gives rise to all phenomena. Not content with a universe devoid of moral values, it becomes necessary to invent one. Since people formulate these systems they commonly position themselves on top of the heap. Dogs, the most loving and best friends of humankind, have some, but not enough of, whatever it is of which humans have the most.. And finally it is only humans, or by becoming human, that sentient beings may enter the higher realms of the transcendent hierarchy (Heaven, Paradise, Nirvana, etc.). The dog is only a despicable scavenger.

The above are what may be called the realist versus idealist positions, or better, “the way things are” versus “the way humans would like things to be”. Neither position can be finally proved nor unproved. I just don't know. I'm agnostic, and the older I get the less I care. I want to believe whatever makes me feel good. Metaphysical medicine; not a blind faith, but a reasoned faith. I need to believe that anything as beautiful, loving and good as my dog Skunky cannot and should not be for nothing. I had somehow helped him with his short happy life and he brought meaning to my life and opened a rusty armored heart. My dog is not gone but restored to the whole. He is still with me because I too am that whole and I love him.

I hope someone will hug a soi dog, it may change their life. And don't forget “dog” is God spelled backward.

Sincerely,
Richard



Caro BEN,

I want to congratulate you and old Italia on the triumphant victory in the World Cup. Though I have no interest in any of the ball games it always thrills me to be reminded of my good days in a past life (one of a multitude like we all have) at my box seats inside the Roman Colosseum. How I liked the Gladiator tussles, though with the animal frays and discipline given to those rowdies from Judea I excused myself to entertain my consorts and take a chariot to the baths at Caracalla for a rub and soak.

Regarding our e-mail exchange (which I remind you was given the OK to continue by yourself) much apology's for the long break from the last communication entitled "the MESS vs. the MUSH". I was sidetracked by the death of a beloved companion. I left Thailand and traveled deep into southern Mexico then returned to my mountain retreat where I'm writing this now on an old manual typewriter.

Admittedly I have somewhat lost the thread of where I was in the series of letters after 5 months. I do have copies of all the e-mails and have read some stimulating new books so I'll write what I can then wait for a response from you with retorts and rebuttals.

First of all I must say that the "MUSH" just will not be flushed. (I also would like you to elaborate on just what you think is a "MESS" about modern science). We cannot flush the "MUSH" because the pipes are totally clogged! The best we can hope for is a helpful plumber (or Philosopher) to stir things up and maybe deodorize them.

The clogging of dangerous and divisive "Made Up

Spiritual Hearsay” was fully detailed in the book “How we Believe” by Michael Shermer (PhD. at Cal Tech). This is the best book I have found to fully understand the extant and rationale people have for Belief. The differing theories of origin and arguments for and against religion are listed with well researched statistics and a huge bibliographic essay. Though decidedly orientated to Western belief, the motivations for and against belief cited in the book are universal.

Most noticeably was the evidence (at least in America) of the growth, and not decline, of religious belief. There is even an “economic theory” of religious belief wherein it is postulated that a free market of religious offerings with leisure time and differing returns for investing attendance leads to a proliferation of various venues for belief. And I didn't know that a majority (sometimes large) of scientists, graduate degree holders and doctors believe in a God and an afterlife.

Here I would like to interject that the above author's previous book (also read) was entitled “Why people believe weird things”. In a nutshell...they believe **BECAUSE IT MAKES THEM FEEL GOOD.**

That brings me abruptly to the previous e-mail subject of intellectual integrity and the saving of ones precious mozzarellas. I won't argue further your switch to born-again status of which you so eloquently defended (you could have been a great lawyer). You should have made the learned point that Riccardo too had made a change; from someone rallying for a kind of religious ecumenism to someone seeing clearly the danger they present to society and environment. You even attended a film show

of mine which purported to promote the ecumenism issue. Of course that was the former BEN in attendance and your thoughts were on the cuties in the audience.

There is nothing wrong with saving ones mozzarellas...IT MAKES US FEEL GOOD. Ones personal salvation or striving for some communion with the numinous realm, the ground of absolute being-spirit-god, is humankind's highest aspiration. Though ultimately an unresolved mystery...some people (many people in fact) believe they and their kind have all the answers. As you well know, and history attests, the most heinous crimes are perpetrated by those who believe they are acting with the authority of a higher power. Herein lies the danger and division (the clogged pipes) of religious organizations.

It truly appears as if mankind's greatest aspiration may become mankind's greatest debacle. In an age of trans-global participation with multi-national and scientific exchange using instantaneous electro-communications, it is religious difference leading to war, over-population and unconcern for environmental degradation.

It is my understanding that you say “don't blame God for it”.... “it's mankind's free choice.” Well it is mankind's free choice to believe any and all “revelations” which are not only conflicting and unverifiable and which are the root problem and cause of the “MUSH”.

In Philosophy there is what is called a “justified, true belief”. At one time I believed in Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny and the Tooth Fairy. I even had justification for these beliefs (evidence) because the food and drink I left out for them at night was gone in the morning. It so

happened that one of the criteria...truth...was missing from the belief.

In organized religions most people (because it makes them feel good) are willing to believe something without justification or truth as criteria. This is called "faith". In the book mentioned previously there was listed a form of religion called "Fideism". I agree with the author that this is faith with integrity because it postulates a "belief" in religion which admittedly cannot be proven, and may even be unlikely, yet the follower has the honesty to admit he has only "faith" to put in his beliefs...hence Fideism. One's mozzarellas are saved without the moralizing to others, the proselytism and bloodshed over books saying this and that.

I guess I'm a crypto-fideist because I have faith in a secular understanding of science giving a spiritual ground of being without the conflicting holy books and their wall-eyed, dried-up old men spouting off. Just think which of the originators of any (and I mean any) current world religion would not throw up if he saw what was currently being done in his name.

Since you espouse revelations, or hearsay (and I won't mention the nonsense of the recent Da Vinci code and Mary Magdalene controversies), why don't you believe in the revelation of that group which claims to be the final word in your desert-religion tradition. And I think they are an Italian group because they call themselves Mausoleums and their religion Iced Salami. Their religion is supposed to correct and supplant yours as the only true and correct way.

WHERE DOES YOUR REVELATION STOP...dear BEN.
There is something in Philosophy called a “contrarion”---a proposition so related to another that both cannot be true though both may be false...

I prefer to save my mozzarellas through a scientifically based, rational, logical, mostly consistent (things change as we know more) worldview. I don't see how a personal God is any better than an impersonal one. A rational one versus a fanciful one. Not one to wait for but to realize it's never left us. So simple...we are it...it is us. As body-mind-environment each one of us are the stars, the oceans, the great mountains, all life in us. All dust has lived before, everything we breathe and eat has passed through everything and everyone who ever existed! I'll close with a few intellectual “chum” bait again.

Past life remembrance is caused by brain stimulation “within” through contact with what Freud called “archaic remnants” in the individuals residual memory. The “archetypes” and “collective unconscious” of Jung constitute further reference to “memories within and inherited in the brain”.

Some day it will be proven that the brain inherits memories somehow encoded in the chemical makeup of the neural network. Just think, all that “stuff” of which you are made has come down through successive body organisms since the first life on earth this time around. I've read that experiments with LSD can induce patients to remember their parents lives.

A new body attracts, much like a radio set, a portion of an all pervasive energy/consciousness. Though the kind of body one has is a result of impermanent and inter

penetrating material interactions of chance cause and effects...the way that particular body “is” will develop an appropriate portion and kind of this energy/consciousness. An ant gets that portion suitable to an ant, a human that portion so on...”

Some day this will be proven most likely through studies done now at Sony labs creating artificial robotics capable of “dynamic intelligence”. The cosmos is full of intelligence though not at all like we know it to be...

As baffling as “dark matter”, “dark energy” and “gravity waves” are new discoveries in “ultra-powerful computers and nanotechnology” which find transfers of physical characteristics between particles at distances from one another no matter how far separate and without any apparent contact of mutually known characteristics. Called “quantum weirdness” or “entanglement” or “non-locality” or by Einstein... “spooky action at a distance”, this unknown information transfer may someday be the workings of “quantum computers”.

There is really nothing that ends...just new beginnings. Not only does every single thing on earth have a particular electromagnetic signature...but consciousness is constant and imminent to quantum mechanics.

your friend,
Riccardo



Dear Ajarn,
Hope all is well with you. My friend Ben declined to respond to the three last e-mails I sent to him. He challenged me to a duel and I was given weapons of

choice. I chose “water balloons” at five paces standing in the Fountain of Trevi, Rome. I'll wait for his acceptance. Concerning our e-mails it must be apparent that I, as many in our time, have become dedicated to marginalizing religions. An honest appraisal of faith-based religions indicates a holdover from the adolescent stage of human development. Being purely tribal creations from past millenniums, religions function as social opiates using “carrot and stick” pontifications best relegated to the mythology and/or metaphysics departments of schooling. There exists today no greater force of separating peoples than each and every sociocultural determined “faith system”. Of course to say such a thing is to open oneself to the most horrible of cruelties (murder, dismemberment, burning, even nuclear retaliation) by the champions of morality and human rights and “my Guy's better than your Guy” mentality. THANK GOD I'M AGNOSTIC. Again I emphasize a call for “marginalization” because as was mentioned in a letter to Ben, the MUSH (made up spiritual hearsay) just won't flush. A very good argument could be made for the “medicine” religion gives, by ameliorating the viciousness and wholesale slaughter humans have shown to one another (as well as their earth-home). Political leaders know this and use religion as a potent support to their power and policing structure. Nevertheless, religion's harmful effects require all thinking people to come together and call attention to the grave state of affairs brought about by religious differences. It also must be borne in mind that when something is marginalized it is ethically correct to offer something in return more appealing. The discourse happening today, upon which I have reflected in these e-mails, will hopefully do just that. For my part I don't claim anything particularly my own but have garnered a collection of

ideas which may offer encouragement, inspiration, and guidance to others with a similar commitment. I have called this a “Modern Mysticism of Secular Scientific Spirituality”, and that a genuine “religion” consists of Philosophy, Art and Science. Alluded to in the previous e-mails I shall offer a brief outline of principles of the above in a closing statement to come.

My study of Buddhism with your generous assistance has led me to the conclusion that it may best serve as a foundation for a more contemporary system of thought. I have argued in the e-mails that Buddhism has acquired a good deal of excess “baggage” from what was originally espoused by Gotama Buddha.

The profound insights into the mind and phenomenon obtained through centuries of introspective contemplation have carried also pre-scientific views of a consciousness somehow maintaining a functional integrity upon release from a body at death to carry residues of past volitional actions and thoughts (called karma) floating through space with a seek and find system to be reborn in some new life-form according to the merit/demerit of the former life-form. This is, just as it sounds, complete nonsense. Along with this rebirth there is a moral retribution accordingly: being born with black skin -from bad karma; born to a prosperous family- from good karma; born with a birth defect- from bad karma; born as a cockroach- from very bad karma, and on and on.

These notions of “rebirth, karma, and the state of nirvana releasing both” are particular metaphysical propositions from ancient India. Indeed they are taken as common to all Indian philosophy. Some scholars believe these were not

emphasized by original Buddhist teachings nor should they be held today if Buddhism is to grow or survive as a “religion”. One only has to travel to India and see the effect these ideas have brought about. In a country of over a billion people there are now living more super rich “Billionaires” than any other country save the United States.. These upper caste folk pay nothing or little of tax and fully 300 million of India's population with bad karma live in utmost squalor on less than \$1 a day. This is as sickening an example of the misuse (or proper use depending on your caste/karma) of religion as any to be witnessed. The land that gave us gurus, rebirth, karma, caste systems and Buddhism is also completely rife with hustlers, swindlers, liars and cheats and is quite literally “every man for themselves”. All its cities are densely congested beyond belief, the air thickly polluted and walkways spotted with excrement of every kind. I hate to point this out because one will also discover in India magnificent artifacts of civilization, splendid landscapes and warm wonderful beautiful people. Yet I know of no better way to support the conclusion of religion's misuse and a defective set of metaphysical propositions. Is it any wonder that the countries with the least religious convictions like Sweden, Denmark, and Japan have the highest standards of living and birth control.

In a book by a Nobel Laureate in Neurobiology called “Wider than the Sky” it is explained how consciousness developed in mammals to pre-human ancestors. This makes more sense to me and maybe consciousness is “inherent” to any emergent living system. The quantity/quality of consciousness developed is according to the nature of its physical system and not any transfer from without containing moral retribution (karma).

Science and medicine have done more for humanity than all the religions put together since the beginning of history. Thank God, yes Thank God some scientist developed a cure or prevention for common ailments and deformities and famines, rather than attributing all these to “karma”. A British scientist has proclaimed that consciousness will be created in a computer by the year 2020. Now this IS heavy. The way a computer seems to have a mind of its own (Windows as extra-intelligence) and the Internet being a mode of transforming one's “self”, enlarging that construct or extinguishing it at will, are most fascinating. From a yogic or Buddhist standpoint this play with “the self” underlines its inherent artificiality and evanescence. Here I find agreement with Buddhism that all things are impermanent, inter -penetrating and without intrinsic existence (emptiness/no self) . That being said it is still quite well understood that a body, consciousness and its environment are contiguous and cannot be separated. Our senses (consciousness) receive vibratory stimuli (environment) and convert these into neuronal signals in the brain (body). Our individual consciousness is creating a “movie” whilst responding to its environment.

Just imagine for a moment...we think we are separate consciousnesses looking “AT” the world/environment...what would it be like to think “WE ARE THAT WORLD/ENVIRONMENT LOOKING OUT”! Now this is really heavy.

I think the issues raised in this collection of letters is a valuable addition to the re-examination of contemporary religious thought now happening. Religious divisions have brought the world to the brink of destruction. It's time for debate...serious debate. I hope this collection of letters will

act as a kind of irritating thorn in the foot, a form of mental distress to anyone reading them. The inclusion of Abrahamic desert religion traditions fuels this debate. To my conception these “revealed” faiths are the direct opposite of Buddhist and Taoist paths of salvation. Being blunt (as I can be at times) with these true believers opens oneself to the most deadly retribution, verified commonly in the news. The new Pope is to be commended for his bluntness though I think his life is in danger for doing so. I do not commend him for his comment that only Catholics can expect salvation (a common refrain from true believers of every ilk) and that his faith is with “reason” whilst the other faiths are merely following orders. This statement from a belief system with no real evidence its founder existed (only hearsay) and that all the proofs of a creator God; Teleological (design), Cosmological (first cause), Ontological (a Supreme Being), have all been thoroughly refuted in academic philosophical reasoning and both Buddhism and Taoism.

The world is seriously threatened by people who have blind, dumb faith. We see it in the Israeli land grabbers, the Caliph seeking Islamists, and the halls of Washington with its Christocrat leaders and lobbyists. Faith is something believed in without reason or evidence...a blind leap of belief by true believers. “The Battle of Fat Black Books” is precisely what is happening in the world today. We are all sitting on a powder keg because of religious differences. The real fireworks may start at any time...our biggest bombs on our biggest cities (and headquarters of the Fat Black Books respectively). When the smoke and cinders have settled wouldn't it be ironic that the Fat Black Books themselves brought their own elimination. Point the finger always in all ways to anything which is

both stupid and dangerous to all. I feel called upon to help others realize this truth...before it's too late or afterwards to pick up the pieces. We must all of us COMPLAIN VOCIFEROUSLY and not be passive. Articles of faith without reason or evidence (even Buddhist ones) when upheld by dangerous true believers must be exposed by all thinking, concerned, compassionate people. Relegate these doctrines to the margins of societal intercourse...to mythology, cultural anthropology, abnormal psychology and science fiction. Incompatible religious doctrines make a mockery of interfaith dialog...the idea is oxymoronic and futile.

Our lives can be ones of plenitude, ethics and universal responsibility with endured suffering through a religion of science, art and philosophy devoid of millenniums of tribal folklore. I like to say HAVE FUN, BE GOOD TO ALL, AND DON'T MAKE A MESS!
Sincerely,
Richard



A closing letter from Ajarn:

Of the many paradoxes in Buddhism exists the dialectic between thought and one-pointed awareness, between discrimination and undivided attention, or between doubt and faith. None of these mental faculties bears fruit in isolation; to be conducive to peace and wisdom they must co-exist in harmony. The spiritual search for many, however, begins with deep questioning and uncertainty. And even for those who feel convinced from the onset, the Buddha insisted that his teachings are not to be blindly

grasped and followed. We must make them our own, be a witness to their inherent truth, and reach the state of “faithlessness” (assaddha), i.e. become perfectly self-reliant. Dhamma-vicaya, investigation and analysis of spiritual teachings, and of nature as it unfolds around us, is one of the seven factors of enlightenment. It is an essential ingredient to awakening, and it is in this light that I applaud Richard's spirit of inquiry.

Richard introduced me to Okkham's razor, the law of parsimony: “Plurality should not be posited without necessity”. Although for practical, everyday affairs and contemplations I actively support keeping things simple, there are aspects to the Dhamma, to nature, that are profound and not easily translated to simplistic explanations. Prominent among these is the law of dependent origination, which describes the “tainting” of consciousness by ignorance, and the subsequent effects on our personal experience. Ultimately this teaching incorporates the law of karma and the process of rebirth, both momentary and from one life to the next.

Richard would probably decline any labels, of “Buddhist” or otherwise, and draws upon an eclectic mix of spiritual traditions. Perhaps he holds closest to the view: “I might not be and it might not be mine; I shall not be and it will not be mine”. In the Anguttara Nikaya, the Buddha praises this as the highest of views outside of his dispensation. As Bhikkhu Bodhi comments, someone with such a creed will not loath the cessation of individual existence. But like all beliefs (including the Four Noble Truths), they are not ultimately true in themselves, but are rather tools for reflection and realization.

These discussions have provided me with a valuable opportunity to clarify aspects of the teachings for which I had only hazy understanding. There are scriptural stories of disciples being enlightened while listening to Dhamma talks, or even while giving discourses themselves. My wish is that these discussions will assist others in their quest for lasting peace and well-being.

Ajarn



AN OUTLINE OF SECULAR SCIENTIFIC SPIRITUALITY (for others to consider, add to and contemplate).

❖1) Evolution has not ended and its principles are continually operative in living organisms, their consciousness and the Universe. We live to know, to experience and to pass this on to others. Evolution is not directed with an end to itself, but is open, contingent to circumstance, transitory and without moral qualities other than those humans bring to bear upon the process. In human natural selection it is only the genome which is transferred in sexual reproduction. Acquired characteristics or moral qualities are not contained in the genome and are not transferred in sexual reproduction. The Universe does what it can...and not always what is best.

❖2) Both time and space are infinite and eternal. If this is true then at any given time in any space we must say... “that” is the very center point. In infinite megatime and

multidimensional Universes... Eternity is now and a Universe is hidden in the Universe itself. To be liberated from time one must know there is no time but...this instant. To be liberated from space one must know the eternal now...and be there. Both Relativity and Quantum theories uphold the conception that space/time is contingent to an observer.

❖3) Energy and the its emergent awareness are inseparable, and also infinite and eternal. Everything is energy which manifests as matter like water forming ice. We perceive energy according to human resolution. Consciousness must emerge from specific conditions of energy resolution. Since nothing can exist by itself we must conclude that consciousness was always a potential inherently in energy. Since our body/brains manifest consciousness there is no conceivable separation of ourselves and the energy eternally available. The eternal energy manifests itself to realize itself. Thus consciousness/energy is subject to the law of conservation of energy and is infinite and eternal. The act of meditation is to become conscious of consciousness and by doing so to unify layers of consciousness...the primal unconsciousness with the mundane personal consciousness.

❖4) The meaning of life is that there is no meaning or that it is not understandable to our current human knowledge. Similarly God is that which encompasses our extraordinary wonder and quest for understanding. To the question what is God?, one must answer, God is! Ideas of Religion are problematic because they're asked in the wrong way. To be human is to be uncertain. Any conception of Heaven cannot include a place...it is a state

of being particular to the imagination of humans. Images by which humans conceive spiritual realities are metaphors for the inter-connected human “body/mind/environment”.

❖5) All processes are cyclical and each are infinite and eternal. There is and never was a beginning, this is a concept to limited human thought. All phenomena transpire in an unending series of cause and effect. Birth is the cause of death not only at the level of human resolution but to all processes operative throughout the eternal cosmos. Only a cyclical expansion and contraction of Universal energy is plausible. Effects occur by causes, but there is no ultimate course of phenomena. Spontaneity and uncertainty are infused with change and in an infinite series of cause and effect, an infinite series of combinations occur. When anything is possible, anything can happen. Any eternal return is not only probable but without exception.

❖6) All phenomena are transitory, inter -penetrating, and without any inherent being beyond contingent causal events. We experience things as mere glimpses of an eternally unified process. Wrongfully our brains perceive phenomena as discrete pieces when ultimately these phenomena are all in a whole. Essentially we are “body/consciousness/environments” all at once and any sense of separation is purely illusory. Nature itself is neither ordered nor disordered. These concepts are a culturally and species determined “information processing” done by our “body/consciousness/environment” in combination... since they are not in any ultimate sense separable. Humans need to conceive an order to maintain a sense of being and not lose themselves in

chaos. This even though quantum theory dictates there are no things in themselves but only probabilities.

❖7) The human self is the isn't that is. One does not die because “you” never were born, you had just forgotten “who you were”. We are nothing but everything, each of us an individual Youiverse containing cultural and genetic information common to all. Discontent or suffering is through maintaining a sense of individual self from the totality of Universal phenomena. Without a self there is no division and no discontent. To be aware of the self as one with all things is to experience pure love and that is ultimate peace.



Books herein listed bear upon ideas expressed in **“The Ajarn and the Artist”**; they may all be found at www.Amazon.com.

Eugene d'Aquili and Andrew Newberg, **“Why God Won't Go Away”**

Marcus Aurelius, **“Meditations”**

Georges Bataille, **“Erotism; Death and Sensuality”**

Stephen Batchelor, **“Buddhism without Beliefs”**

Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, **“Handbook for Mankind”**

Wing Tsit Chan, **“Source Book in Chinese Philosophy”**

Mircea Eliade, **“Yoga; Immortality and Freedom”**

Sheldon Erdman, **“Wider than the Sky”**

Thaddeus Golas, **“The Lazy Man's Guide to Enlightenment”**

Sam Harris, **“The End of Faith”**

Stanley Kaufman, **“Critique of Philosophy and Religion”**

Sheldon Kopp, **“If you meet the Buddha on the road kill him”**

Kenneth Rexroth, ed., **“The Buddhist writings of Lafcadio Hearn”**

Matthieu Ricard and Trinh Xuan Thuan, **“The Quantum and the Lotus”**

Michael Shermer, **“How We Believe”**

Alan Watts, **“The Book; on the taboo against knowing who you are”**

Alan Watts, **“What is Zen”**

Ken Wilber, **“Quantum Questions”**

Richard Artrichard is an artist educated in California, USA. He has lived in Europe, Mexico, Tahiti and Asia (where he studied Yoga, Buddhism and Chinese Art). He has been a war photojournalist, a teacher and a hermit committed to modern mysticism and social/environmental activism. Visit his website at www.yogirich.com