

MIND AND REALITY - Day 1

Tape 7 of 8 - Panel on Wisdom

TAPE START

CHRIS KELLEY

00:00.05

And I also want to thank you for keeping pace with this schedule. If you've been here since this morning, thank you. This last panel is called wisdom and its focus is ontology.

00:00.25

Today, as you know, is dedicated to theory and our first panel was basically angled toward epistemology, the second one was phenomenology and now, obviously, we're looking at ontology. And I will get out of the way now, but I want to introduce you to Paul Gailey, who is the senior science advisor to the Fetzer institute and he will be the moderator for this final panel. Thank you very much.

PAUL GAILEY

00:00.54 Thanks, Chris. So, we will begin with our target essay by Bob Thurman and Bob tells me that he is the suffering chair of the religion department here at Columbia and I suppose that means he's not yet reached Prajnaparamita.

BOB THURMAN

00:01.13 Thank you. That's enough. Thanks so much. And thank you all. Thank you especially Chris and Annabella for organizing this and the Center for the Study of Science and Religion. Bob Pollack and other people working there. And I'm really delighted, actually, to see such a great crowd on a Saturday in the city to come to Lowe Library and discuss these topics - philosophy of mind and Buddhist thought and neuroscience, whatever.

00:01.43 And I just have to say because it's related to wisdom because this all came about - this event - in this way because of the defiance of authority, which is a very good sign in relation to wisdom as defined by Buddhism. That is to say, Chris

Kelley, who is my graduate student, I strongly urged him not to organize this conference, when I first heard about it. Because he's in his phase in his graduate study, I was afraid it would take up too much time. It would slow him down.

00:02.11

And nowadays, you know, the way education is treated in our country very disrespectfully. Our graduate students are urged to rush through and get it done and get out of there and this kind of thing. Or their money and apartment is cut off, and so on. So I urged him- I thought it would be unwise that he would spend such a lot of time organizing this conference and he defied me and I'm delighted that he did. Because I think it's wonderful that he organized this conference.

00:02.35

And this is a good lead-in to the topic of religion in relation to Buddhism, because I think that wisdom in Buddhism is- and maybe wisdom is not the right word for prajnyaa - the Sanskrit word, prajnyaa. Wisdom in Buddhism is not sort of

the, this sort of resigned, beaten down resignation of the grey beard, you know, who's seen the groundhog come out of the ground so many winters and is kind of accepting the world and all its imperfections and therefore has sort of like, given up whatever it is.

00:03.09

Not at all. The symbol of wisdom in Buddhism is a beautiful female. The Prajnyaapaaramitaa, the mother of all Buddhas. I always think of her as the alma mater who sits out in front of this building. That's an incarnation of her. And Prajnyaapaaramitaa, the mother of Buddhas, like Sophia, the Gnostic goddess of wisdom in the Middle East and Eastern Mediterranean.

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And the other symbol is Manjushri, the youth, who is an orange, 16-year-old kid, looking kind of punk because he's orange colored, carrying a sword and a book. Arrrrgggh! Like that. And challenging conventional wisdom, in fact. Very

much so. So, I'm gonna read a bit through the paragraphs of my target essay.

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And wisdom all too often connotes either a Gnostic wisdom, type of contemplative mystic experience with the ultimate, transcendent of mundane of mundane details or worldly wisdom, secular resignation to not knowing, but accepting of a troubled world, based on age and experience.

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The Greek philo sophia, love of wisdom, is quite like the former, though more positive and perhaps more realistic in its quest of the true, the good and the beautiful. In Indian Buddhism, Sophia emerges as Prajnyaapaaramitaa, the divine knowledge of freedom seen as the supreme feminine, mother of all Buddhas.

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In Indic languages, prajna can mean something like a super-knowing of reality, both relative and ultimate. From the earliest times, Buddhist thinkers distinguished between relative,

paratantra, or superficial, samvrti, reality and absolute or ultimate paramaatha, or deep, gambhira, and profound, samvrta, reality.

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The former are realities which seem to be there on first glance, but when investigated dissolve under analysis, though they may reappear when one retreats from analytic investigation. The latter are realities which truly exist just as they appear, not dissolving under analysis, being actual. It turns out, of course, that the only reality that qualifies as the latter, that is as ultimate profound and so-forth, is voidness, shunyata, and absolute or exclusion negation, also referred to by all its many synonyms.

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One delightful corollary of this two reality theory, often referred to as the two truth theory, is that the two correspond to samsara and nirvana - the worlds of suffering and bliss, respectfully. The former produced by misknowing and so being relatively unreal and the latter

discovered by superknowing, and so at least relatively more real.

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This may be why the Buddha had a dazzling smile. The super-knowing of actual reality is the only way to achieve freedom - there was a question about liberation - to achieve freedom from suffering, according to the Buddhists, as its opposite, misknowing, ignorance or delusion is the cause of the endless suffering of the egocentric life cycle.

00:06.06

As the Indian Buddhist Shantideva said, in the ninth chapter of his great masterpiece of the Buddhist teachings - a synthesis of the Buddhist teaching - he said all of the Buddha's teaching is nothing but a preparation for the attainment of super-knowing wisdom. Since it is only super-knowing wisdom that causes freedom from suffering, renunciation, ethics, compassion, meditation - all these are important and necessary to complement the central path.

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But only super-knowing of reality leads to freedom. So this, I think, is really a very important thing and why. Well, ok, I'll just read. The Buddha became so famous and founded such a powerful movement because he discovered, or thought he did - of course, it's very possible he was wrong - that the human mind was capable of super-knowing. I.e., overcoming misknowledge, misperception and unrealistic beliefs and rationally and experientially coming to know accurately the true nature of relative and ultimate realities.

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He saw this movement toward liberation and freedom, from misknowledge to knowledge to super-knowledge, as an educational shiksha process. That which he could open up for other human beings, at least human beings, and eventually all beings, so they also could find out what was real and also, also escape suffering.

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The Buddha's four noble truths were a challenge to humans to rise from their confusion and misery, not a religious credo or dogma or anything of the sort, but a diagnosis of the unenlightened human illness and a proscription for help.

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A key point I would make there is that in saying, as I do in this essay, one of my main gist points - as I only have an half an hour - one of my main gist points is that Buddhism is more science than religion. I don't mean to say it's not religion, of course you can't say that and it's, you know, we study here it at Columbia in the religion department.

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They don't study it in the philosophy department, although they should. But our culture hasn't caught up to that yet. But we study in the religion department because that's how it's classified, but actually it's more science and they naturally don't study it in the natural

science department. Unless they can catch a yogi, and attach some mechanical objects to his brain, or whatever.

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I think you're the likely candidate, Timbala (ph). And so, it's, you know, it has to be acknowledged that it has a religious element, of course. But it is more science than religion. The reason being that the Buddha's main teaching is that when you know your reality, and you know, corollary to that is that he judged human beings capable of knowing reality, understanding it fully.

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But only when you fully understand reality will you be free of suffering, which is the goal. In other words, the path to salvation is not belief in something, it's not the activity of a savior, it is your own understanding. That's the only way out of suffering. And if science- I mean, people say many things - it's a community of this and

that there's all kinds of different definitions of that, too. Whatever we mean by it.

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But, basically, the idea that by understanding better reality, we can ameliorate life. We can ameliorate human life. I think that's the fundamental drive within science, also. Although I think science has a much less preposterous aim, in that Western science, at least, is based on the idea that we cannot know reality fully.

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And, you know, you have the whole idea, like the whole Socratic idea of where he's supposed to be the wisest man in Greece and then he goes around saying he doesn't know anything. You know, and then the more you know, the more you study, the more you know you don't know type of idea. That's the accumulation of knowledge in science. And therefore, it's based- any scientist who said, like the Buddha did - Eureka. I'm translating. Or, wow, you could say.

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Buddha said under the tree - I have discovered a reality like an elixir. Profound, calm, untroubled, luminous and uncreated. Whomever I instruct in it, they will not understand. Better to stay alone in the forest without speaking. The last sentence is just being coy. He, of course, did come out. He spoke interminably.

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But the first sentence is the key. Upon attainment he said he had discovered a reality like an elixir. The elixir of immortality. And then he gave it all those epithets, you know. So, a scientist who would say, oh, after this experiment I have the grand unified theory. I understand the reality totally. All of you guys would give him a tranquilizer, would be like Prozac, you know, give him a leave. An extra sabbatical. Take a break, write a poem, whatever.

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No way would such a person be accepted as sane. So, we have to realize that the Buddha's tradition is founded in this tradition that which

expresses a belief, if you will, or a judgment about the human brain really and the human mind, or whatever it is, mind or brain, that it is capable of understanding its universe. And that only through that understanding is there liberation from suffering.

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And that is why Shantideva says that all of the whole- everything he's written heretofore, everything in the Buddhist teaching about every other subject is all for the purpose of helping people to develop wisdom, which is that which releases them from suffering. So these are the words of a scientist- you know, these would not be the words of a scientist alone in his lab-

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-whose insight into reality's deep nature took his breath away and his delight knows no bounds, but his enthusiasm is tempered by an awareness of how difficult it would be to explain to anyone else. And neither are they the words of a prophet

inspired by divine revelation with a holy mission.

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Thus, the Buddhist tradition is - this is my argument - is more science than religion, as usually defined today as an organized form of subjective, non-rational, in principle, faith in various unprovable things. It is more- That's the definition of religion. I think- if science becomes dogmatic, I think it also may be subject to that definition.

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It is more a process of education than an adoption of a credo or the joining of an institution. The teaching in practice- You know there's two types of dharma - one is called agama dharma, textual, and one is called practice dharma, adhigama dharma, or understanding dharma. Consists of the three higher educations, the most important of which is the super-knowing higher education.

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Only that wisdom - I already said- Corrective learning is the primary method. Critical reflection is the indispensable second step to deepen what is learned. And concentrated meditation the essential third step to bring the critical insight to the level of transformative experience. Corrective learning means study of the great treatises of previous, possibly enlightened beings and taking up the challenge of reexamining one's own world view in the light of the critiques put forward in those treatises.

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Critical reflection means engaging in the rational, experiential struggle between one's personal persistent habitual views and those advanced by the Buddha and his successors, often aided by a regime of formal debate, which Sanjisantrup (ph) here, Geshey Dreyfus is an expert at. Although you should have taken off your jacket.

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And those advanced by the Buddha and his successors. Often aided- within which we cause- since inferential investigation within one's own mind operates on the same patterns as inferential argument with others and public engagement and exposure of the ego intensifies the level of emotional investment immeasurably and therefore, to develop very powerful internal critical meditation, you know, vipassana - which seeing through type of meditation - which will break you free from all irrational beliefs.

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You need to debate with other people first to sort of warm up and that's why debate is such an important part of the Buddhist educational curriculum. The sound, as my friend Georges wrote in the wonderful book, the sound of two hands clapping. Concentrated meditation naturally follows intense critical reflection since the points of doubt to the web of perplexities become so existentially gripping that sustained single-

pointed focus on those points becomes a natural preoccupation.

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So, the three types of super-knowing wisdom emerge from these three levels of development - learning, critical reflection and meditation. The important point being that the intellectual and experiential are not contradictory, ultimately, but are connected along a range of understandings.

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Then the four noble truths are an experimental program. Here truth- The word truth is more propositional than ontological. Calling them noble was the Buddha's way of acknowledging that they are not true for an ordinary being who doesn't suffer all the time. Who doesn't think there is or needs to be a final freedom from suffering.

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A noble here is not a person of higher social class, but rather, someone of a higher cognitive

class who has transcended egocentrism at most levels and so perceives things from others' points of views as equal to his or her own. The first truth- Well, I want to just say this. Let's unpack a little further the scientific side, the scientific claim.

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There's another level at which Buddhism and science if, you know, Bob Van Gulick said, very wonderfully I thought, and rightly that the physicalism tempered by non-reductive in a historical way that he explained very helpfully is a hypothesis. It is not presented as an absolute law, technically.

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Although, I think, actually, many scientists do cling to it as a dogma, like very strongly and many philosophers of science. Like Dennett, for example, who I recently had a little discussion with. He- I think these people feel it's really- it's an absolute necessity. And there, of course, they have a reason and I sympathize with that

reason, absolutely, because, you know, just as you said that non-reductive was to temper the imperialism of the unity of science type of approach, you know, coming from the 19th century...

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So, physicalism is introduced to temper the imperialism of the church in Western history because all of the scientists really do not really feature being burned at the stake. And once you have these invisible properties and things coming in, it's not only dark forces, it's also the force of authority. You know, controlling people's souls, so to speak, and feeling what's good for them, you know- It's for your own good as they burn you at the stake, you know.

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I think- I don't know why, but you know, anticipation of hell maybe gets you to heaven. I don't think so. They don't- They're just introducing you to hell a little earlier, I think. But the point is that has a history, too.

But nowadays maybe it could be released as a dogma. Released, at least, in order to stick true to the idea of science that everything is hypothetical. It should be released and criticized when encountered as a dogma - the dogma of materialism.

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As in a writer such as E.O. Wilson, someone like that. But the point is that Buddhism also is non-dogmatic because of shunyata. It's a strange - there's all these strange paradoxes in Buddha's teaching, as I think, in life. Although the Buddha said, "Eureka, I understand everything and it makes me happy," he also said it won't do you any good to believe that. I'm not asking you to believe that. I do. I want you to criticize and examine and doubt everything and you'll come to your own understanding. That's all.

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And if you begin to use the methods that I suggest to you and you find in those educational methods that you come to an understanding then

you say, well, maybe Buddha did understand something. But just to believe that I understand it is useless. And so it's this ironic thing that the direct experience of reality is what makes one a Buddha, enlightened and free from suffering.

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But that direct experience is the experience of what they call shunyata, which doesn't mean nothingness. But means a contact with reality that is elusive to verbal formulations. That is elusive to encapsulation in dogmas, theories, even hypotheses. And that, however, does not shut off investigation with words and mathematics and whatever tools of mental and physical tools of investigation you might have, but actually opens it up.

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It simply is like the grand disclaimer ahead of time. Anything we elaborate will be a relative, will be useful in a context and we can always improve our elaborations and our theories and our

ways of approaching and our machineries of measuring, but there will never be one, final sentence, verb, mathematical formula, grand unified theory, the one on one, perfect language fitting with the elements of reality that will control it. Intellectually that will never happen type of thing.

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So, in that sense, all descriptions in Buddhist- They have a statement that all descriptions of relative reality, differentiated reality are hypothetical. They are interpretable is the Buddhist hermeneutical expression. Only the statement that reality is void, in the sense of totally relational and devoid of any absolute capture by any intellect or by any theory or by any verbalization - that only, that negational theory, which opens the door to endless exploration of the relative world. And in a way validates the reality and the importance of the relative world.

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Voidness, far from making the relative worlds inconsequential, in a way it is a teaching of new escape because you can't get into voidness. Like you can't become nothing. You can only deal with the relative with absolute concern and compassion. That's the dictate. And therefore, compassion dictates that you become a scientist and try to use reality, shift reality for human and benefit and benefit of all life.

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Because there's no other place to go. It's like, you know, everyone here would stay awake forever if necessary, if we really believed that we could never leave. There's no going home. No escape. We have to work it out. Our dialogue has to finish in everyone understanding everything or we never leave.

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So, then no one would sleep. No one would leave. So, the first truth of the four truths is the diagnostic observation that the ego-centered, ignorance-dominated life is inevitably

frustrating and unsatisfying, hence suffering.
Let us emphasize that this is not all life, but
only that dominated by misknowledge, or
ignorance, or wrong-knowing.

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And how does that come to be the case leads to
the second truth - truth for noble, not for
ordinary person, not for a self-centered person.
Second truth is the etiology, the causal
analysis, how it happens. And how does suffering
cause, how is it caused by ignorance. As the
misperception of reality, delusion, especially
the delusion about the absoluteness of self or
intrinsic essence in persons and things.

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And here, it's very simple. Actually Dharmakirti,
you know, Georges's friend Dharmakirti had a
great statement here he made, which I can't
remember the Tibetan or the Sanskrit, but I only
remember the Shivatski (ph) - all successful
human action is preceded by accurate knowledge.

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We all know that if we know which is east, west, north, south, we can get to wherever we're going. We have to have realistic precise knowledge to do something effective in the world. Practical. And if we don't know where we are, we will not get where we want to be. And therefore, if we don't know where we are cosmically, if we're deluded about what we are and what the world is, we're not gonna have a happy life.

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And what is that delusion? It's really very simple, not mysterious. Everyone here in this room now knows that they are here. And that would be alright, actually, that's not really delusion. You all are here. But everyone thinks that they're the main person here. Secretly.

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You keep it quiet because you know that nobody else agrees with you. And you know on top of that, they have the temerity to think that they're the main one here. And, of course, you know that they're deluded. So there we all are,

each one of us here, and everyone else disagrees and also life and death disagree in the whole universe.

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And therefore, we constantly lose our struggle to sort of prove what we really feel, which is that we're the most important. We're the most real. This is based on the idea that we're the most real. You know, like *de cogito* is a form of that of Descartes. And everyone has this subliminal feeling - one thing I can't deny is that I'm really.

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And that's what ignorance is. Precisely that. And so, Buddhism agrees with science, too, that we are all delusional. You know, what we think we're doing here, what we think we are here is a delusion, right? It's a bunch of molecules and atoms and actually, you guys can get into molecules too much, you biologists. Subatomically, you don't even know what a

molecule is. It's all dissolved under analysis already.

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In Copenhagen, they before a good Tuborg beer that they couldn't say anything about deep nature of reality. It dissolved under analysis in 1926. And so, so, the point is we're all delusional is the point. And science wants to get us out of this delusion by discovering, dealing with the physical things. Because they don't want to get controlled by the church. And I agree with them.

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And we see the church is coming back, by the way. And so, we still agree with them strongly. And the Buddhists are trying to use their, to sharpen their equipment of their knowledge and their brain, as encouraged by the Buddha, to develop their wisdom to directly understand, to experiential, finally. First intellectual, rational, discursive and then finally, experiential knowledge of the nature of the world.

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And that will- On the idea, on the hope that that will improve their ability to deal with the world. And they'll be able to deal with it non-egocentrically. They'll realize that they're only a relational being, in relation to all the other beings and not the absolute being. And this will get them out of the problem of always being overwhelmed by the world, which is what otherwise will happen to them.

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The fourth truth is the- therapeutic falls into it. That's that one. Now, because I only have a couple of seconds and I wouldn't want to- so I'll skip a bunch of stuff about praasangikas and many things. The last thing- because I want to challenge the Buddhists and I want to say that in this light - and this relates, actually, to what was happening toward the end of the last session.

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So I want to just say this - that dualism, mind-body dualism, is a sort of sacred thing in the

Buddhist description of the world, more or less on a sort of popular level. Because they don't want to give up the idea of the effects of moral action. The negative effects of bad action and the positive effects of good action.

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And they feel if people get off into the void or something, they're gonna start behaving badly and they behave badly anyway, but give them a bigger excuse and they'll behave much more badly. And so the Buddhists are very strict about it. And sort of they want to say the mind cannot be reduced. They follow along with the Hindus, like my colleague here with his enduring self.

00:25.04

Thank goodness you have one, Stephen. I'm gonna study with you, see if I can find one. I've lost mine. And I'm told, by my family. And colleagues, I think, sometimes. And, but my point is that therefore the fact that mind cannot be reduced to matter is sort of a fairly sacred thing on that level.

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However, remember all statements about relative reality, of which mind and matter and action and good and evil - all of these are relative reality - are interpretable. That is to say valid within a certain context. And there are areas of Buddhist science slash philosophy where matter is reduced to mind.

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I think William's talk touched on that - what he calls the Yogacharya or Vinyanavata (ph) Buddhist idealism, form of Buddhist philosophy slash science. And there are areas, though less well-known in the esoteric teachings of tantra, where matter- mind is reduced to matter. You have like extremely subtle mind, extremely subtle matter and at the level of extremely subtle mind and matter are said to be indivisible and inseparable.

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And even Antuktala (ph) can't deny it. I remember one time we were talking - you were with His

Holiness and I said something like that and you and His Holiness were digging each other in the elbow and His Holiness said you're a naughty nihilist. Don't be a nihilist, don't be materialist in other words, he was saying to me. You, too, were giggling. I remember that.

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But the point is that the Buddhists don't have to hang on to this non-material mind. Because all you have, what we have to do to have a really good dialogue with those who are stuck in the physicalism thing or not too dogmatically, but still they feel that they'll be arrested or something if they drop it.

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The point is there's levels of extreme subtlety that are not yet explored and they can be open to that. Even Daniel Dennett the other day, I said to him- Because he was immediately saying about, you know, rebirth and all that crazy stuff, you know. The minute you would say there's a mind, you know.

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I said, well do you admit that there could be a level of physical subtlety that we don't yet have any idea about. And there may be no way of getting at it except by the brain, operated by the person who has the brain. Not even machines, or maybe later machines there will be. And he said, yes, I'll admit to that, you know. He said, I can admit to that, he said.

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And I said, well then you can then say that at that level, there's a Daniel Dennett that did not yet dissolve under analysis and will be, of course, just as half-baked as the Daniel Dennett walking around solidly, but would maybe take rebirth as a turtle if you don't watch out. And he said, no, I can be moral. I'm not gonna reborn and all this.

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I can be moral. He went off into the moral argument about why rebirth was not necessary. But I was very happy because I noticed he's thinking

about that. Because I surrendered the idea that we have to have a non-material transcendental thing that they have to accept, but it doesn't exist in their mind. And so then, we're just like any, like, neo-creationist fundamentalist.

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In a way, they are right to say, oh, we have to have- we dogmatically have to have a mental, non-physical thing. We do not. Ultimately, it's sunyata (ph). All descriptive systems are different ways of operating around relativistically within delusion. We are not dogmatically attached to any description of- whatsoever. And in order- that's the true scientific aspect of Buddhism and I'm sure the time is up. Thank you very much.

APPLAUSE

BOB THURMAN

00:28.29

That's my challenge to you guys.