

CARNEGIE COUNCIL *for Ethics in International Affairs*

Secular Ethics: Old/New Shakyamuni, Dalai Lama

Global Ethics Network

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Transcript

Introduction

DEVIN STEWART: We are so pleased to have Professor Robert Thurman here at Carnegie Council. This is a real honor for us and a real pleasure too. Thank you so much, Professor.

Just by way of brief background, Professor Robert Thurman is the professor of Indo-Tibetan Buddhist studies in the Department of Religion at Columbia University. He is also president of the [Tibet House U.S.](#), which is a non-profit organization dedicated to the preservation and promotion of Tibetan civilization. He is the president of the [American Institute of Buddhist Studies](#), which is a non-profit affiliated with the Center for Buddhist Studies at Columbia University. *Time* magazine chose Professor Thurman as one of its [25 Most Influential Americans in 1997](#), describing him as a "larger-than-life scholar activist." Larger than life—I can attest to that. He has since lost many pounds.

Finally, as if that's not enough, [according to *The New York Times*](#), Thurman is considered "the leading American expert on Tibetan Buddhism."

Today he will be speaking about "Secular Ethics—Old/New Shakyamuni, Dalai Lama."

With that, please welcome Professor Robert Thurman. Thank you very much.

Remarks

ROBERT THURMAN: Thank you, Devin. Hello, everybody.

I'm delighted to know that Carnegie Council believes that "Ethics matter." I think that's really good.

This topic has to do with, of course, His Holiness the [Dalai Lama's](#) efforts to develop what he calls a secular ethic, which he outlines in this book, which he published not too long ago, called [Beyond Religion](#), in which I was very relieved to see as the subtitle "Ethics for a Whole World." He originally wanted to have "secular ethics" in the title. I kept arguing against that title actually myself and asking him not to do that because secularism has this idea of being anti-religious in the West, and of course he is not anti-religious, not at all. But his response was that in India he considers secularism means respect for all religions, but simply pluralism; it's really pluralism.

I said, "Yes, Your Holiness, but this book is being published in the United States." So I think I prevailed to the extent that he changed it in the actual title but he talks about it here.

He says:

Many discerning people are aware of the problems of people behaving unethically and destructively and are working sincerely to redress them from within their own areas of expertise. Politicians, civil servants, lawyers, educators, environmentalists, activists, and so on. So long as people give priority to material values, then injustice, corruption, inequity, intolerance, and greed—all the outward manifestations of neglect of inner values—will persist.

So what are we to do? Where are we to turn for help? Science, for all the benefits it has brought to our external world, has not yet provided scientific grounding for the development of the foundations of personal integrity—the basic inner human values that we appreciate in others and would do well to promote in ourselves.

Then he goes on more with a new vision of secular ethics. He finally comes down to this. He said: "In such a world"—describing the difficulties we are having, social tensions and so on—"I feel it is vital for us to find a genuinely sustainable and universal approach to ethics, inner values, and personal integrity—an approach that can transcend religious, cultural, and racial differences and appeal to people at a fundamental human level. This search for a sustainable, universal approach is what I call the project of secular ethics."

Then he further describes it over here. He talks about other people who say that this must be based in a particular religion, and religion is what really sanctions and guarantees people being ethical. But he demurs from that and he says: "While I fully respect this point of view, it is not one I share. I do not agree that ethics requires grounding in religious concepts or faith. Instead, I firmly believe that ethics can also emerge simply as a natural and rational response to our very humanity and our common human condition."

So that is his project of secular ethics.

I have known him a long time. We have been friends since 1962. I hate to be that old, but I am. He is six years older than me. His dialogue with science is something that he is very, very much into and which I also enjoy.

But he has a principle where we have a little bit of disagreement, in that he says "I don't discuss reincarnation with scientists and I don't discuss nirvana with scientists," or emptiness, or selflessness, some of the central Buddhist concepts. He said, "When they want to talk about that, I say, 'You don't bother with that. That's Buddhist business. That's not your business. Your business is this and that.'"

So then I always question him. For example, at Columbia not too long ago we had a dialogue in what's called [World Leaders Forum](#) there with [Lee Bollinger](#). I demurred from that in public, but we have debated it a lot in private.

I said, "Your Holiness, scientists are seeking to know the nature of reality, are they not?"

He said, "Yes," knowing what was coming. Looking a little grim, he said, "Yes."

I said, "Well, we do believe that nirvana and emptiness and also karma and reincarnation are part of reality, don't we? We think so."

He said, "Yes."

I said, "Well, then how can we say it's not part of our dialogue with the scientists?"

He gritted his teeth and didn't say what he usually says to me when I bring that up to him in public. His final concluding argument to me is, "Haddam!" [phonetic], the equivalent of "shut up."

He said, "Anyway, there is no good reason"—except that he feels that the scientific materialism is so deeply entrenched in the materialist culture, and in our scientists in particular, and they are so threatened by the idea of having a future life, that if you brought that up he couldn't discuss other things with them. So that's what he always does.

Over the years, I have come more and more to see what is called the theory of karma, not as a religious or mystical or spiritual theory, but a biological theory actually. If you subsume it under the Buddhist hermeneutics principle, that the only definitive meaning teaching that the Buddha gave is the pure negation of selflessness or emptiness—all kinds of negations, like infinity, they're all negative—and negation is studied in Buddhist epistemology very carefully, for negation is something where the mind doesn't necessarily close around the understanding of it.

For example, if we say "there is no elephant in the room here," there is no moment where you achieve understanding of the non-elephant in the room. But you would if you were looking for an elephant—"Oh, this elephant." But the non-elephant you never really come to closure about it actually; you just look around for the elephant under conditions where you would find it if it was here, and then you decide it isn't. But there could be someone who has an elephant on a bracelet or something, or there could be a little one in their pocket, a picture or something.

So negation has a different sort of mental conclusion. So that everything is empty of intrinsic reality, for example, is that you just keep looking, and then at some point you decide "Well, I can infer that then the rest of the things I didn't examine are also empty of intrinsic reality."

You don't find the lack of that. It's like when you look for something and you don't find it, then people can say, "Oh, did you find something?" You say, "No, there was nothing there." But actually they didn't find the nothing. You never do. Only materialist scientists find a nothing with a dead body. When they think they have found the lack of the existence of future consciousness, when the brain of the dead body is inactive, they consider they have found that nothing. And of course, they want a Nobel Science Prize for it. For discovering nothing basically, they intend to receive one.

So all that's an aside, but I'll come back to it.

So then I got more into looking at what's called the Tenfold Paths of, literally, skillful and unskillful action—karma. I'm sure some of you may know that. But some of you may not, so I think it is worth listing.

The hermeneutic is that that's the only definitive meaning teaching those negations. The positive teachings, like descriptions of relative processes, are only relative, they're only valid within a context; there is no absolute truth on a relative level, in other words. It's like a [Popperian](#) thing. Descriptions of relative processes are maybe the best within certain contexts, or worst—better or worse, true or false, or relatively true or relatively false. There is nothing that is absolutely true or absolutely false, only relatively true or false within descriptions of relative things.

Therefore, something like a karma theory, which is an attempt to describe how life is shaped and formed, and particularly why we are all different, and even identical twins are different, and different animals are different—it is a description of that, which is the job of biology, right? [Darwin](#) said we all

have genes, we share genes with chimpanzees and so forth. But actually, [Buddha](#) preceded him by thousands of years, in that we are totally connected to chimpanzees—and not only genes, but we all personally were chimpanzees in previous lives and will be chimpanzees again if we behave in too chimp-like a manner, which would be considered unfortunate, when we become the chimp and we can no longer go to the Carnegie Council and have lunch and discuss ethics. We will not be able to do that as we have the freedom to do that as human beings.

So basically, it is a description of life. I was very much encouraged lately by a book by [Thomas Nagel](#) down here at NYU, a philosopher, called *Mind and Cosmos*, where he makes a rather minimalist but philosophical argument that biologists' attempts to explain all of life through a materialist, reductionist procedure are doomed to failure, principally because the people making that description are living in denial of the existence of their own consciousness, which really you can't deny. A person who has consciousness and is making a theory or doing scientific research can't really get along without a consciousness. I mean the philosophers or the scientific philosophers can tell him that he doesn't really have a mind, it's just his brain makes him think he has one as long as the brain is functioning, and really there is nothing there—someone like [Daniel Dennett](#) or somebody like that will explain that to him. But that is still in denial of the fact that some kind of energy process is going on, which is our awareness, reacting to our environment and so on, and doing things in relation to it.

So karma, if you see it then as a Buddhist theory, is an evolutionary theory. If it's an evolutionary theory, what is the purpose of the evolution? Of course, one of the things of materialist science is that nothing has any purpose; it's just an accident, it's random mutation, and we are a bunch of weird humans crawling around on this little planet.

[Carl Sagan](#) is beaming out [Beatles](#) music and [Mozart](#), hoping for a response, with big antennas down there in Mexico, or wherever they are, and desperately trying to hope we are not alone in the universe and that, whatever alien it is, they are not like the ones in the movies. The one benign alien actually, in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, showed our human insecurity totally. Mr. [Spielberg](#) felt the only thing we could take in terms of a benign alien who could fly something that looks like Times Square hanging upside-down over your head with that powerful anti-gravity machine, the only person who would operate that would be [Casper the Ghost](#), that little guy looking very feeble. It wasn't like [Arnold](#) or a body builder or like a biker or something; it was some totally wimpy little character, so as not to make us feel insecure.

Looking at this Tenfold Path then, as a biological description, the goal of the evolution is to become a Buddha, of course, to become enlightened. Enlightenment means to develop a consciousness that identifies with the infinity of life. By definition, it may be a delusory idea, of course—I can't swear to it because I didn't become one myself—but a Buddha is a being that has expanded their sense of empathy, of compassionate attunement, to other beings to an infinite degree, not just a person to their teammates on a football team or a mother to her child or a father to his child or lovers to each other and so forth, but has expanded that where the being identifies with everyone.

What they call the [Dharmakaya](#), or the reality body of a Buddha, is where you feel the whole universe is your body, apparently. I mean it's a pretty extravagant idea, but that's the ideal thing. It's like where you experience yourself as one with the entire universe.

There are two kinds of such oneness, at least, but there are two for all purposes of what we are discussing today. One is what I call the "cheap oneness," where you have a big experience of vast infinite space and you feel that's all there is. And you're not floating in it, like a bird flying around; you just are that vast infinite space, that's your real you. I call that the cheap one because nobody is

there. It's all one, but there's no one there, so you don't have to bother with other people. If you come back, then you feel, "Well, I'll go back there when I die, but now I'll just run around, be holy usually, I'll be a guru or something." That's what people do, like that's a mystical thing.

But the Buddhist one is much more expensive because you are one with everything, and everybody is there, they're all there, and then you see them, and a lot of them are miserable and they are suffering and they are escaping from lunatics, like in [Syria](#), who are dropping bombs on them and so on. Then you have to feel concern for them because you identify with their feeling. But because you have had the vastness of that experience, you have a kind of infinite well of blissful energy that you can somehow deal with the suffering, supposedly.

There are a lot of arguments in Buddhism like, "Why would I want to be a Buddha? I hate my own headache. I wouldn't want to have everybody else's headaches." Then the answer is, "Well, but by expanding so hugely you have a vastness that enables you to deal with others' headaches, and it's like you have this double complex consciousness where at the same time as you see that other beings are feeling like 'I'm separate from the universe and the universe is pressing down too hard on me and therefore I have a headache,' you realize that their reality is not that; their reality is all beings are this one entity, which is a bliss energy, and they are made of that actually, and what holds them together, even their atoms, is that bliss. It's a vision like that. That makes you able to deal with them."

So if that's the goal, that fantasy or delusion, if it is, or that genuine achievement of human beings, if that is the goal, then ethics has to do with whatever advances that goal.

If you kill another being, for example, the first—the Sanskrit word is *kusala-kamma-patha*. The word *kusala* means skill; it doesn't mean virtue actually. It is usually translated as virtuous and non-virtuous action, and even in Tibetan they translate it from Sanskrit as virtuous and non-virtuous. But it doesn't actually mean that. It means skillful or unskillful.

Now, why would they call an ethical action a skillful action? Because it advances the evolutionary purpose toward that presumed goal, if you follow me. In other words, if you kill someone, you are disregarding their own existence as the owners of their bodies. In Buddhism you haven't destroyed them totally because their soul or their continuum—since they don't like to use soul language because it will encourage people to absolutize their egos—they say "the continuum of their consciousness." You can't destroy that. That goes on.

But you take away their body by killing them. And so you are saying, "Their existence is not part of my existence." So you are limiting your being and you are moving away from the goal, which is to identify with everyone, to feel everyone is you in a sense, if you follow me.

If you steal from them, take what is not given to you, you are disregarding their sense of owning what they have, and you are additionally therefore limiting and cutting yourself off.

The extreme opposite of that enlightened state is a state of complete contraction and a huge boundary between you and others, solidifying that boundary between you and others to such a degree that they describe hell as like being trapped in a red-hot iron ball. But it's like you're in prison. You are safe from people doing something to you from outside when you are in a prison because they can't get in. But you are in a prison, if you follow me.

Similarly, sexual misconduct, which can be defined according to social circumstances differently—it isn't always only adultery—but, in a way, if you see it in these terms, human sexuality is when the individual has the best chance of melting into at least one other mutually, in ideal loving form. Sexual

behavior is where the sense of separate individuality is given away by the ideal partners in the act. So therefore, to use that act in an abusive manner, where you are harming the other and you are actually ruling that their life is not part of yours, they are just a tool or instrument of your behavior, that then is sexual misconduct, if you follow me. Again, more isolating yourself—in other words, an ethical act that isolates you rather than connects you to life, since that's your evolutionary goal.

So if you know that in the history of India at the time that Buddha elaborated this tenfold path of *kusala-kamma-patha*—of course, the legend is that in a previous life he received that teaching from a teacher, so he didn't invent it. But the description is a description where he takes the word "karma," which meant prior to Buddhism a ritual action—and it still can mean that in Sanskrit—and the reason that was considered an important action is that you advanced your life by the benevolence of the gods and you attained that benevolence by hiring a priest to do a ritual for you that placated and appeased the gods and made them do something for you. Therefore, that kind of ritual action came to be known as the powerful action that influenced your destiny.

Buddha is celebrated for discovering causation as an abstract process, that your state has to do with a set of causes and conditions that produce a certain state. Unlike other religions' founders, the Buddha is mainly not celebrated for having talked to god, although he did—he talked to various gods; he talked to the one that they thought was the creator, *Brahma*, and actually that god became his disciple, they say in the Buddhist literature. It could be self-serving. But he did.

That god helped him teach. And actually, that god asked him, "Please teach when you get enlightened and tell living beings that when horrible things happen to them it's not my fault because, contrary to their belief, I'm not omnipotent and therefore I just do my best for them. But we're all mutually creating the world together. Everyone has some responsibility for creating the world." In other words, karma theory also includes that idea. It's not just one person can be blamed for the whole thing. Brahma asked him. There is text where he told him, "Please go and teach them and tell them that it's up to them and I do my best."

Brahma is very benevolent, he's very good. Although there's a kind of Brahma, they say, who later in future life after that becomes a monotheistic fanatic, and there is an amazing analysis of such a person.

Buddha said that the story of Brahma is that Brahma is luckiest being from the previous big crunch, the *Big Bang*. There have been endless cycles of that in the Indian cosmology. Brahma is the first one who comes from a place where the beings hang out when the universe is in dissolution, a sort of heaven plane, energy plane, and then he gets reborn when the world evolves to a certain point. Then he is all alone, and he is thinking, "What's going on? Where am I? What am I doing here?"

And then, suddenly, other ones appear. When they see him, they say, "Dada," because they think he created them. Then he first says, "I didn't create you, and I don't know what's going on. Cut it out." Then he sees they feel very insecure, so he says, "Okay, okay, I'm your Dada, it's okay."

Most Brahmas know that, so therefore they know that—they are not quite sure—they didn't really do it, they are part of the stream, a vast part of it. But the occasional Brahma thinks that when they wondered where was everybody and then people showed up that that was their act of creating them. So they think when they were Brahma they created the universe. And then Buddha says, "Those people become religious fanatics when they are reborn as human because they subliminally remember when they were god and thought they created the universe."

I mean it could be complete nonsense. But it's an amazing way to analyze certain people's behavior I

think. It took me like 30 years of reading the same [Sutra](#) to notice it, actually. It's remarkable. The psychiatrists would have a field day. And the parents would get a break, because now the parents are blamed for ruining everybody when they are infants, and the only effects of how you grow up are what happened to you when you were a child. Whereas now what happened in your previous life is also influencing you. So that's really kind of nice for the parents. It gives them a break. "It's your own karma that you're an idiot. I didn't make you one." It's really good.

In other words, what I'm saying is that Buddha himself, in terms of what the people could take as a reality view or a science view of the day, in his day, he elaborated the theory of karma.

It's a relative theory. Like when Carl Sagan asked the Dalai Lama—there's a video of him. He says, "Your Holiness, if we made an absolutely foolproof experiment and we proved beyond the shadow of a doubt there was no such thing as reincarnation, what would you do?"

His Holiness thought for a minute and said, "I'd stop believing in it." [Laughter] "I'd give it up. No problem."

Sagan is like, "What? This reincarnation, you're saying you'd give it up?"

Then His Holiness rubs his hands together, looks at Carl Sagan, and says, "Now, how are we going to go about setting up that experiment?"

Of course Sagan is silent. He couldn't figure that one out. There is no such thing.

Anyway, in other words, it's a relative theory. It's ready to be disproved anytime anyone can disprove it.

The key here, and what His Holiness is doing today in terms of our current materialist scientists—and I applaud what he does and I support it, although still I want him to push it a little further, because I don't think the scientists are that fragile—although they are very fragile.

I finally discovered why recently, why they are so fragile. Have you ever thought about it? You may not have this issue because you may be a scientific materialist yourself. Our culture is, actually.

One time I was meditating late at night, when I was a Buddhist monk in my twenties, and my original teacher, an old Mongolian man who lived by then in New Jersey, had a little monastery there, used to interrupt me meditating all the time. He just had a thing about it. He had like a psychic honing skill, radar. When I started meditating he would come and interrupt me.

He found me one night about 3:00 in the morning meditating away, sneaking there in the temple. He said, "What are you doing? Why aren't you sleeping?"

I said, "What do you mean what am I doing? I'm a Buddhist monk. I'm meditating."

He said, "Why are you meditating?"

I said, "What do you mean why am I meditating? I want to attain enlightenment."

"Oh," he said, "you can't attain enlightenment. You're an American."

So then I said, "What do you mean? I'm a Buddhist monk, blah, blah, blah, and I believe in former and future lives."

Then he said, "No. You're an American. In order to get enlightened you have to have a mind, and you Americans don't think you have one. So therefore there is nothing to become enlightened. So forget about it. Let's go have some yogurt and you can get some sleep."

So then I argued and argued and resisted and resisted. But then, since then, I have come to realize that it is true in the way we are brought up. Our reality sense doesn't come from church or synagogue or mosque or temple. It comes from our science classes when we grow up. We are assured that the mind is an epiphenomenon of the brain, and we are materialistic things. If you get depressed, they give you a drug, Prozac, whatever. We may go out and eat vegetarian food and all that, and then we get cancer and we run over to the materialist doctors and scientists and think they have something for us because we are conditioned like that. It is very hard to get out of that. I realized that's what he meant, my teacher, that he was telling me that.

So then, when you bring up, though, to such a person—it doesn't have to be a natural scientist; it could be a philosopher who is into that. I remember my debate with a guy from Duke, which was a really strong debate I had some time back. They immediately say, "What's your evidence there's former and future life? What's your evidence?"

You say, "Well, there are a lot of people who remember their previous lives. There's a lot of documented cases."

"Oh, that's anecdotal," they say.

Then I used to get intimidated by that. But now I remember this: people get electrocuted on the basis of anecdotal evidence, or exonerated. So don't say it's not powerful. It has power, anecdotal evidence, especially lots of it. When it is accumulated it has very strong force actually, logical force. It should. It's data.

But then they're unsatisfied. They say, "Well, that's not evidence. We don't consider that evidence because it's not material."

But then—this is the key—what is their evidence that you cease to exist at death? And not only what is it, when will they ever have evidence of that? That's the question.

I always like to joke when I get in that debate with people. I say, "Did Carl Sagan show up and say, 'Hey, guys, it's cool, I don't exist, I'm not here'? Is that possible? I don't think so."

No one will ever be able to confirm that a human being ceases to exist at death. They'll never be able to confirm that, (a); (b) everything that has ever been observed in nature has continuity. We never see something become nothing. Things change state, and we don't see them anymore—firewood burns, the thermal energy goes, the dust, the smoke, etc., but we know the law of the [thermodynamics' second law](#), no energy is ever finally destroyed; it can be entropically diffused, but it is never destroyed. So why is consciousness the one thing that has no energy? Why is that? There's no reason for that.

Therefore, the certainty of materialists—my grandfather was one. I had big arguments with him from the age of 92 to 94. I won the argument and he started supporting me as a Buddhist monk. He was a confirmed materialist. He didn't want to have to wash the dishes in his next life. He was happy to have my mother and his wife wash the dishes. He didn't want to wash them. But when he reached 94, when he finally realized he had no reason to hold that view, to be sure about it, he started thinking maybe he would. And he became a lot nicer, I have to say. Talk about ethics. He stopped

arguing with a bus driver when he accidentally dropped a penny instead of a quarter—or a dime I think in those days, a long time ago—in the bus, and then have his pocket picked by somebody else while he was arguing with the bus driver, that type of thing he would do. He stopped doing that.

The reason I think they are so insecure about it, scientists, and so dogmatic in their thing, is that they are holding a blind-faith view. The view that "I will not exist after death" cannot be evidenced; it's not possible. So, therefore, it is just a blind-faith choice.

It's against all nature that there should be such a continuity. It's like the person who says—there's a famous saying in Buddhist writings of the 7th century where he goes to a shop and says, "I want some oranges." Then the shopkeeper says, "I don't have any oranges." Then the person says, "Well, give me those no oranges." That's an example of some of the things. They found nothing, if you follow me.

So that's I think important. It's even important—although the Dalai Lama doesn't like to take the debate to the scientists like that and he tells me to shut up if I do it with him around; but he knows that I do it myself. I love that debate—but not on the basis of religion versus science, but on the basis of science versus science—causal science, causal process, law of thermodynamics, continuity of energy, versus "I'm sure there's no continuity of this particular kind of energy." I pretty much always win that debate nowadays. I've noticed in 30, 40, 50 years of engaging in it that people are less and less resistant to this and more concerned about it.

To me that's very, very crucial to the question of ethics, because what he is trying to do is he is saying, "We are mammals, we have mothers, we are helpless for years, we depend upon the kindness of strangers"—not just [Mae West](#), [*sic. It was Blanche Dubois in A Streetcar Named Desire*. *Editor's note*] we all do.

When you have a baby, although every mother thinks that baby is like the most amazing and beautiful thing that ever existed, basically that baby is a stranger at first. That's why women are, from a Buddhist point of view, more evolved than males. They will accept some sort of parasitic stranger taking up residence rent-free in their belly for eight, nine, ten months. I don't know a male who's ready for that. I'm not, certainly. I've had five children. The few times when I've gotten actually into the delivery room, I've asked for a second spinal block for myself. That's really hard work and painful and difficult.

I'm sorry. I shouldn't get distracted like that. I forget what I'm talking about.

So the question is—His Holiness therefore bases his attempt at secular ethics, which I think will work well for some people, and is a very brave and wonderful thing to do, based on the nature of human life. But of course he is entering a controversial—you know the old argument between [Ashley Montagu](#) and [Konrad Lorenz](#) about whether humans are basically aggressive or basically social, which was a big famous anthropological debate for a long time. I don't think it ever was settled.

But from His Holiness's point of view it is settled that humans are basically gentle and compassionate, which doesn't mean because of extreme intelligence that they can't cook up some mechanical monsters that are much worse than any predatory animal can cook up, big horrible weapons and terrible destructive things.

But basically humans are sort of soft-skinned; their claws are wimpy, you would break your nail if you really tried to claw somebody; no fangs, except vampires in Hollywood; and you can't spit poison and whatever. Humans are wimpy. The evolution of the humans I always feel is that they are cowardly,

hiding in caves, and having to listen to their wives as the saber tooth was walking outside, and she suggested to the guys, "You know, it might not be such a good idea to go out and wrestle with that saber tooth. Maybe you should sharpen a stick here at the fire." Probably the women gave them intelligent ideas of how to use some sort of aid to deal with the predatory menaces around them.

Then we developed language because we talked to each other. The animals don't talk to each other because they eat each other the minute they meet and have no time to chat. You know, if you eat the people you meet, you can't talk to them. And they are not going to really want to talk to you; they're going to run away. So humans are sort of forced to hang out together because of our wimpy thing.

Of course, in the Buddhist karmic thing you get to be human—and you should like this in the Carnegie Council—because you are ethical in other animal forms, in former lives, meaning you are more altruistic, other-regarding, developed empathetic imagination and communication. That's why you sought the human form.

Because otherwise it's not obvious. Why would a crocodile prefer to be a human? We're really not good at lying around on slimy beaches and things if we want a nice tan. We don't have scales. We don't have big jaws like that. Humans don't know what to do. And as a crocodile you just drop some eggs somewhere and then people take care of them—actually not. They deal with their baby crocodiles. A mother crocodile—I shouldn't rag on her because she makes a big job with that scoop of her jaw to get those babies away from the male crocodile and a bunch of birds and weird things when they come wriggling out of the eggs.

But still, the egg-born being has less familiarity, as he points out, than the mammals. Within the mammals, the human infant is very, very helpless for a long time and must be helped by altruistic strangers or will perish. So we are basically that kind of being.

That's his confidence, that scientists will agree with that, and on that basis compassion and ethics generally have an element of enlightened self-interest in it, which is perfectly all right. Actually, he has his famous slogan: "If you want to make others happy, be compassionate. But if you want to be happy, be compassionate." And a person who develops and cultivates compassion—which there are methods to do, psychological methods to do that—the first person they make happier by being compassionate is themselves.

You know the famous [Shantideva](#) teaching, where the more you are concerned for others, the less you worry about your own condition, and the less you worry about your own condition, the less dissatisfied you are. And the more you are focused on "How am I doing, am I in the best seat in the room, am I the most important person?" etc.—of course you're not. So then you get very disgruntled and dissatisfied and ambitious to get to another seat. Whereas if you're thinking about "Is everybody else well-seated?" you don't actually think about where you are and then you're cool wherever you are. It's a simple thing like that, which is counterintuitive for egocentric psychology.

Therefore, the secular ethics project, which the Dalai Lama is engaged in and presents in this book, on the basis of science's studies about the human tendency for affection, compassion, receiving love and affection and compassion, as being essential to human health—there are many such studies—the angry, aggressive disposition causing the human to have ill health; the study of someone who redid the Type A study about heart attack danger, and who noted that the correlation actually goes with the amount of first-person pronoun self-reference. They redid the study, which was originally done in the Midwest, where they then said just "loud, noisy, aggressive, and then they are going to die of a heart attack sooner"—that was basically the Type A thing.

The redoing of it in California, a more advanced place—women a little more powerful and given more latitude—and there when they redid it, they said it was this first-person reference, a sense of "I, me, mine," like the Beatles [song](#), that was the predictor of the heart attack. And the massive range of the heart attack was between 8:30 and 9:30 am, Monday morning. Also, people who do work that they don't love to do, that they do it just for a living and they hate the work, that's also the second major danger—not the noisiness, or even the amount of overwork. You can overwork like mad, which I shouldn't tell to a non-profit manager—you can overwork like mad if you love what you do. It's healthy for you.

So that's his project.

Then, if you go back, I take that further. I say [Shakyamuni Buddha](#) is doing the same thing in a sense. He is looking at the science of the time, where they did not have this what I consider psychotic idea that I don't exist, and therefore what I do doesn't matter, and when I die there will be no consequence of what I do, which I consider psychotic—if a person is reckless and careless and therefore destroying their own planet because they don't really exist, and it doesn't really matter, it's just an accident anyway, it's random mutation, there's no god, no teleology, no soul, no mind—so if we wreck the whole thing, once we're all dead we won't be missing having been alive because we won't exist.

That's unfortunately the driving force of why people don't wake up to climate change, why we allow psychological giants like [Vladimir Putin](#) and [W](#) to brandish nuclear weapons over everybody's heads—we allow that, our population allows it: "Oh yeah, he needs the football." And maybe [Donald Trump](#) will get it next—who knows? Anybody heading for the exit? I could mention a few more, but I won't.

That's why, because somehow we are convinced.

Now, religious ethics, I agree with him, in a way you have a future. As I said to [Rick Warren](#) once in his conference, "At least you guys have a future life. You'll only have one—not like us, you don't have many—but it's really long." He did laugh a lot about that. But that means that your sense of consequence of what your life has done is a powerful thing. So it gives ethical behavior some kind of sense of an element of enlightened self-interest, out of being kind and pleasant and unharmed to others.

Basically, without that, in pure materialism, ethicist types of philosophers are convinced that ethics is just a matter of personal choice. But human beings don't make choices that will carry them through situations where there is pressure on their choices for no reason. We're not like that. We don't do that. That's why we have a system now where people just do whatever they can get away with worldwide, basically. Nations do that, but populations also do that too much.

He tries to do it through a basis in the science of the mammal. Shakyamuni did it in terms of the science of the multiple life and what Thomas Nagel calls for, which is some bringing of the mind back without just relying on god and theism, which is one of the things that stops scientists from even entertaining letting the mind be a force in nature, and have the mind be a force in nature in a specific setting. If you are generous in a previous life or in this life, you will be wealthy in the next life. If you are stingy, you will be poor. If you are violent, you will be ugly. If you are tolerant, you will be beautiful—the source of beauty is tolerance and not responding to injury violently. If you want to be human, you will be ethical and other-regarding, which is what is the essence of the social element of a human being.

So some version of that, I think, is necessary, because the religious thing—and even, unfortunately, the religious thing, where people do have a reason to do it because God told them so, in the monotheist tradition, that "God gave down [Ten Commandments](#) type of thing, so better follow them or god will punish me," that is sort of simulating, that is giving another reality. It's not that convincing, unfortunately, to what most people in the world would have felt.

So in parallel to develop a sense that "when I am good, it's good for me as well as the world." It's like when you lift a weight or you do yoga, and then you don't think that when you do yoga that someone is going to come and award you flexibility and good health. The yoga itself reshapes your body. The training—you pick up a weight and then your muscles develop from using that weight. Somebody doesn't come and award you better muscles. It's a natural part of your behavior.

So from the Buddha's description of the karmic evolutionary theory, ethics is something that reshapes you in a better way, which is there in some of our proverbs: who lives by the sword dies by the sword, this kind of thing, meaning by being violent you attract violence and then you will be killed because you are shaping your life in that direction.

This is the kind of thing—finding elements in science, in nature, in religion, in humanistic theory—that gives the person reconstruct for the so-called nonexistent person, so called by the blind faith of unphilosophically trained natural scientists who have been promising for a century and more that they are going to solve it all with more and more machinery, and have been totally failing, and bringing the planet to the brink actually by people following them, as would be predicted in ancient India. Instead of that, that's maybe the global ethics that your Council can work on.

Thanks.

Questions

QUESTION: Thank you very much, Professor Thurman, for your remarks. I really appreciated them.

I wanted to ask for follow-up on two boundaries that I see you trying to sketch out, one between Buddhism and secular ethics and another between materialism and empiricism. You make some arguments that I am curious to hear you sort of extrapolate out from. The first is your assertion that science and materialism stands in some position of responsibility for issues like climate change—

ROBERT THURMAN: Yes, sure.

QUESTIONER: The other that religious ethics—and here you were sort of gesturing towards Christianity and the idea of an afterlife—stand in a position of potential solvency for climate change, which is an interesting rearrangement of what I think a lot of people's expectations would be. There is a longstanding tradition among hardcore secular environmental types that it's actually Christianity that's the problem because there is an expectation of another life and this life doesn't matter. There is also a rich tradition in Buddhism of validation of empirical science—maybe not materialism, but certainly the world as we know and experience it directly. Maybe you could say a little something more about the tension between those.

ROBERT THURMAN: Thank you. That's good thinking, good question.

Actually, in the case of Buddhism, I see Buddhism myself as only part religion and part science, actually what we call—I don't see it fitting our definition of a belief system, simply that a religion is—like [Clifford Geertz's](#) type of definition of religion. Partially it is that. For the uneducated in

Buddhism who are the lay supporters of the monastic institutions and monastic universities, in a way they are just believing what Buddha told them, and in a way that is religious, and I accept that totally.

But the educated ones who are studying, following the [Eightfold Path](#), the first branch of the Eightfold Path is not meditation and it's not—if it may be called the "realistic worldview" or the "right worldview," or I prefer to translate it as "realistic worldview"—or you could say "realistic belief."

But that's not religious belief in that it is not a leap of faith. You are only asked to believe in causality, actually. You know the famous verse giving the epitome of Buddha's teaching by one of his close disciples to another who became his closest disciple was this [Sanskrit phrase]—my friend will know that—that of all things that arise from causes, what are the causes, and how to terminate particular causes—that's the teaching of the great seeker. *Śramaṇa* means a wanderer looking for reality.

So the reality grounding aspect of Buddhism was a rebellion against the Vedic religion of the time completely. Buddha was told by his dad, when he told his dad he wanted to take off and go discover the nature of reality, "That's not our job, son. You've got to do defense, health, education, and welfare. You've got to be the king. You don't have to go dealing with that. The priests and the gods take care of people's sickness, death, old age, suffering, all this kind of thing." He said, "No, Dad. They do a lousy job and I want to do a better job if I'm going to take care of my people. So I'm going to go find out the reality of things and then try to work from there, not just fit in within this culture."

His thing of cutting his hair and leaving his throne was a super shock in Indian history actually, a complete shattering of norms.

So I see Buddhism as, in a sense, a kind of science, and actually I see it as a perhaps even more thorough science than our modern one. We think we're so great. But there's a famous verse in Shantideva that says: "There are two things you can do when you don't like walking barefoot on the earth where there's a lot of sharp stones and broken glass (nowadays) and thorns and things: cover the earth with shoe leather—which always makes me think of a baseball or a softball—cover it entirely with leather and then you can walk around barefoot as much as you like, or make a pair of shoes."

The Indian science decisions—more general than Buddhism, but it's very much spurred by Buddha—was the primary thing to take care of is the mind because it's the mind that reacts to the physical circumstance. And then, arranging physical circumstance as well is not unimportant and we work on it, but the primary thing is the mind and how to cultivate an open mind and a resilient mind and a non-neurotic mind, etc., etc. So the psychology is the absolute primary thing.

The Western material thing, if you could say, coming from the Greeks—that's our tradition somehow, after the brief moment of 800 years of [Dark Ages](#), of being dominated by the church, is like: fix the environment; pave the earth with leather, and then we'll be okay.

At Columbia University, we don't really pay attention to the mind. We don't teach ethics. You'll hear a college president say something about "our graduates have learned decency here." But there is no training in decency actually, except maybe reading some novels where the bad guys get wasted and you decide you don't want to be a bad guy. But otherwise there is no training, and there's no idea that you can train even intelligence. You just get more information and skills. You don't cultivate intelligence, you don't cultivate ethics, you don't cultivate positive emotions and un-reinforce negative emotions. How to handle anger management, we don't teach. If we tried, they'd say we're importing religion or something, or we're trying to shrink out students, or something like that. We'd be accused.

So therefore you could say that our modern technology we're so proud of has magnified our greed, consumerism, and polluting the earth, and pumping away the coal-fired power plants that excel in buying more and more things and using up resources. The hatred is magnified by technology into nuclear warfare and germ warfare and biological warfare.

But no comparable attention to the inner qualities of the being. I've been teaching 50 years, 45 actually—my wife would get me—and there is no direct addressing these issues in the students. It's not part of the job. But it should be. They talk about decency, critical intelligence we hear about, but goodness we don't hear about. Then everybody wants to pay a little attention to the art department so there is some attention to beauty, I guess. And what are the yogas of our universities? Football, lacrosse, all military sports basically, competitive military sports—beating up the enemy, "beat the Lions," Columbia. We don't at least have the Harvard/Yale thing, but we have some enemies. I don't know who they are.

So in that sense I don't think it is an issue between religion and not. Unfortunately, those secularists—to address the latter part of what you said so perceptively—those secularists blame the religions as causing all the trouble. But the part of the religions that causes the trouble is the idea that "I can behave badly and then repent and then *Deus ex machina* will come and save me anyway, all undeserving, the old Protestant thing; or I've been preselected, the really weird Calvinist one, a really strange one—and being Scot, since we're in a Scot's land here, we'll have to bring that up—and therefore, there is kind of an escape valve. That enables people to behave recklessly, because God will take care of it. The consequential aspect of it wants to impose ethics, and they shouldn't blame religions about that.

My addition to that is that the spiritual nihilists, that there is no mind, or mental nihilists, you don't really have a mind—Daniel Dennett, Steven Pinker—we don't have minds; it's just the brain makes us think we do; the minute we're dead it's gone. So we don't even need god to exculpate us from what we've done. There's just, period, no consequences to it.

That's why you have Mao, Stalin, Hitler. They're not following religious things. They are basing on the materialist thing that they can kill any number of people and it will not affect them in the future. There is no personal stake in what they do.

I'd even call it kind of spiritual or mental circuit breakers—you know, when there is pressure in a circuit in your house, it clicks off. A circuit breaker is if I believe the reality view that I have no consciousness, except for the delusion my brain produces, then when I am about to blow my stack and get angry, I will restrain it and resist it; but when the pressure builds too much, what kinds of things do we say in our culture? "Go for it," "what the hell"—we even use the word "hell" and say "what the hell"—or "whatever," that "whatever" thing—and then, bang! I will lose my temper.

I will not consider that restraining it is like an ultimate concern, that negative thing, because somewhere is the idea that right this minute anybody who is really—like my guru accused me, thinks that my mind is like that—if it's too awful, bang! I no longer exist. The brain stops. I no longer exist.

So in a way, I'm thinking that I am held in a matrix, an escape zone of nothingness, that I can enter just by destroying my brain. That makes me reckless, and the culture becomes, enfolded in that sort of reality view, which from a sort of psychological/scientific point of view from the Buddhist-educated tradition is the unrealistic worldview, that there is no continuity of the self, even the selfless self, which the Buddhists have meaning; it is not frozen or fixed in any way.

QUESTION: What's the link between ethics and emotions? Clearly, it is a key link.

ROBERT THURMAN: Well, the connection between them—I didn't get to that. In the tenfold skillful and unskillful path of evolutionary action, as I like to translate karma, there are the three physical ones—killing or saving lives; taking what is not given or giving gifts; the sexual misconduct or positive sexuality, truly loving sexuality—those are the three physical.

Then there are four verbal, which are: lying; speech that causes dissension among others, provocative speech that pits people against each other; harsh speaking, speaking harshly, abusively; and speaking meaninglessly and trivially, idiotically, wasting people's minds that have to listen to you. Those are four things again which can be analyzed in terms of producing more interconnection versus isolating yourself from the target of your speech, the listener to your speech. Then there are three mental ones. The mental ones are hatred in the mind, malice, malicious mind; greed in the mind, covetous mind; and then delusion or fanatical conviction in the mind versus open-mindedness, instead of trying to be of a realistic mind you could sort of say.

Those mental ones relate to the emotions. The negative emotions are the ones that again separate you from others. Actually, since action only becomes powerful evolutionarily when it is accompanied by certain motivation and intention, the three mental ones are really very important as to determine one's evolutionary future, which is why in those cultures, even the ones that are not directly Buddhist but influenced by it—Taoist, Hindu, etc.—the whole meditation thing becomes a big deal, because you are trying to train your own mind to get away from those emotions that cause you to do those actions, and even holding the emotions separates you more from the world around you and makes you more blind to what is going on in it, and the positive ones open you more to it and make you more aware and connected to it.

So mental states are ethical and unethical actually. To sort of change a bit the [inaudible] statement, the mental ethics, the engine of the mind, never idles ethically speaking. It's never on idle. It's always creating some effect.

QUESTION: This is Deen Chatterjee from the University of Utah.

Bob, I like your idea that Buddhism is a science of consciousness, it's a science and it's a science of consciousness, it's moral psychology. In that sense, I like your take on the idea of karma, the theory of karma, as an evolutionary descriptive.

I also don't believe that there is any moral order in the universe. The universe is morally neutral. It's our effort that makes us better. Buddha was directly along that line.

But then, of course, I take issue with one aspect, and we have had debates in the past on that, on reincarnation. As you know, when you did that conference at Columbia and I took issue with the Buddhist idea of reincarnation, where I was trying to give a secular, naturalistic interpretation of Shakyamuni Buddhism, you really waited in line to get into a debate with me after that. You said, "How could you say that, because Buddha literally believed in reincarnation?" I was trying to give a symbolic interpretation along exactly that line, to try to devise the theory of karma.

The whole idea of our person, "I consciousness," it is in this word, we are the psychophysical embodiment of our consciousness. A person is a person who is a [inaudible] concept. That goes with the Buddhist idea that the seven factors put together make us what we are. How would you say that after we die the same psychophysical combination of our consciousness as we are—I- consciousness is going to be exactly reproduced in some later life. Maybe the consciousness continuity, I believe in that, thermodynamics and all that. But this idea of continuity of personal identity, that I have a problem with, and philosophers have a problem with it too. I'm not getting into

scientific materialism; I'll leave that out.

Based on that I would say the Buddha would be like the Dalai Lama. He would say, "Okay, if it can be proved that way, I'll start believing that."

ROBERT THURMAN: I'm not quite sure I completely follow everything that you said or understood everything that you said.

But there is an argument that the teaching of selflessness, *anatta*, in Buddhism makes it impossible for Buddhists. There was a Brahmanical argument against them, that without *anatta* there can be no rebirth, which they would rather call it, rather than reincarnation. That is a misunderstanding, in that the rejection of *anatta* is the rejection of a fixed, absolute, unchanging personal self, which is rejected; or a fixed essence of a chair or a table or the floor or a building or a planet, anything that has a fixed what they would call intrinsic reality or intrinsic objectivity, or intrinsic identity even. They have a wonderful expression for that.

So that's what *anatta* is targeting. Therefore, even a person in a single life, their self is constantly changing, influenced by their environment. There is no unchanging thing in any person. Emptiness means that all things—actually it's the discovery of relativity rather than the discovery of nonexistence of anything; it's the discovery of relativity. Within that discovery of relativity, there is no limit to the relationship of things. Everything is a cause and it brings about an effect, and that effect is the cause of something else. Because of the realistic worldview being an acceptance of causation, the concept of an uncaused cause or a first cause is considered irrational and completely senseless because it means something came from nothing and that's misunderstanding what the meaning of nothing is. It's not there; therefore, nothing can come from it; it's not a place.

So in that light, as far as whether Buddha believed in that, Buddha believed in that—I mean every story about the life of Buddha and the enlightenment of the Buddha—when the Buddha is enlightened, he has three enlightenments. One is he remembers infinite previous lives of himself; every single story at every level tells it like that. Then he remembered everybody else's previous lives, which must have been a huge shock, because—and that's a ground of compassion in Buddhism, because what that means is "you've all been my mother in a previous life. I'm so sorry. I was a big pain I'm sure. I bit everybody's nipple I have no doubt. But everybody, even the males, were my mother. And actually I was all of your mother and I forgive you. But that's only because I can't remember what a lot of trouble you were."

Since there's no beginning in life, it is beginning-less, then the Big Bang didn't mean the beginning of the people. The people are in the second Vienna [phonetic] realm, the second heaven, the *brahmavihara*, during the time when there is no sort of differentiated planet in the cosmology. So beings have always existed, in other words. They got out of the chicken-and-egg problem by just letting them go on, there's always been that chicken and that egg, so that human, that embryo, has always been there. That's in every story.

Any of these secular Buddhist guys that say, "Oh, we're modern. Oh yes, emptiness is like nothingness, and even translated emptiness is nothing [Sanskrit word]." In Sanskrit there's a word for nothingness, *abothwa* [phonetic], and Buddha never used that word or that term. Emptiness is a middle way between the distortion of nothingness and the distortion of an absolute something, separate from other things and yet absolute. That's considered utterly irrational. Absolute means non-relational; therefore, absolute can only be the network of relative things. That's called non-dualism, as you know.

So the Buddha was clear. But the other thing is Buddha is not accepting the version of reincarnation that existed at his time. He is elaborating it much more differently and carefully, where people are creating themselves, like a Brahman can become a [Shudra](#) if they behave like a Shudra; or they can become a subhuman, humans can revert back to a lower animal form; and then there are angels, divine type forms, and also lower hellish types of forms. But he elaborated that actually.

Some people, I think, some folklorists—they are Dutch; they'd have to be Dutch to get into that—attribute the discovery or the promotion of hell to Buddha actually, which is quite interesting, in the sense that at a time in history, the [Axial Age](#), when the burden became more on the individual throughout Eurasia and less on the collective, and the individual had a higher opportunity to develop into something fantastic, especially in India, there was also the danger the individual would have a dangerous consequence if they behaved really massively badly, like a serial killer or a king who killed a lot of people in war and so on, and then the hell thing developed. Before that, if you were bad, you would just dissolve into the earth and then you became fertilizer, in the early Upanishad and in the Vedic literature.

So he elaborated a form that fit with the kind of individualistic thing. That's another thing people—they always think Buddhists are like they don't know they're there or something, they're not individualistic. Actually, the Buddhist enterprise is highly individualistic. When the Buddha refused to be the king, cut off his hair and said, "I'm going to discover the nature of reality, I'm going to become some higher consciousness," that was totally individualistic. He was saying, "I am not going to do my role in the society here because I'd do a bad job being an egotistical brat brought up in a harem. I'm going to become a better being. Then I'll try to help people." But when he did, he didn't return to the throne. He became a wandering Buddha.

I'm sorry. I don't know if I answered your question. I don't know if I fully understood it. But anyway, I said something.

QUESTIONER: To be continued.

ROBERT THURMAN: Whatever version—like Bush, W, told [Bob Woodward](#) when Bob Woodward said to him, "What are you going to do about your grandchildren? When you became governor of Texas and took off all the environmental controls off of your friends in the oil business, Texas became the most polluted place in the country. Aren't you going to be concerned for your legacy, what your grandchildren will think when they say, 'My grandpa ruined the air and the water and whatever in Texas'?" And he said, "I don't care what they think because I won't be there." Now, he's so honest. I liked him, too.

Liberals get really freaked because the Dalai Lama likes him personally, although he disapproves of him [invading Iraq](#), which was a criminal enterprise in my opinion, I'm sorry to say. It was, and I said so beforehand.

But he blows the cover of some people. He just says what he feels. In a way, everybody feels, "*Après moi, le deluge*," the famous French saying of [Louis XVI](#), "After me, the flood." When you have a worldview that you won't be around to reap the consequences of how you behave, you will be more reckless than if you think you have some—what is it?—skin in the game, what the gamblers call it.

DEVIN STEWART: Professor Thurman, thank you so much. It has been fantastic.

ROBERT THURMAN: Thank you, Devin.

See also "[The Contemporary Relevance of Buddha](#)" by Amartya Sen from Carnegie Council's journal, *Ethics & International Affairs*.

Audio

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Video Clips

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