



A NEW WAY FORWARD

BUDDHIST TRADITION AND MODERNITY ARE IN
MANY WAYS INCOMPATIBLE. BUT ONE WESTERN
INTELLECTUAL TRADITION MAY HOLD A KEY TO BRINGING
THE TWO INTO MEANINGFUL DIALOGUE.

BY LINDA HEUMAN | ARTWORK BY RENÉ MAGRITTE

When I first started to practice Tibetan Buddhism, I was puzzled by a habit my teacher had. Every time Lama Zopa Rinpoche began a teaching or meditation session, he had us set our motivation. Bringing to mind the sufferings sentient beings endure, we raised the aspiration to attain buddhahood to be able to free them. When the dharma session was over,

he dedicated the merit to that goal. Sometimes we never got beyond setting the motivation. Just as the packs of Kathmandu street dogs erupted in nightfall chorus, Rinpoche would launch into elaborate descriptions of the sufferings of samsara. By the time he dragged through human-realm troubles like birth, old age, sickness, and death, and started in on the 18 hells, the roosters were crowing, some of us were passed out on the floor asleep, and it was time to begin the dedication. While Rinpoche's single-minded emphasis on this bookending ritual was perhaps a bit extreme, I came to learn that motivating and dedicating are a constant of this tradition. It seemed like one of those cultural quirks—a kind of spiritual “fork-goes-on-the-left knife-on-the-right” nicety that modern Westerners could do without. Weren't we here for the teaching and practice themselves?

After a half-decade immersion in Tibetan Buddhist culture and practice, I returned from Asia and moved to a university town. I had extra time on my hands, so I started auditing undergraduate classes and graduate seminars. I was secretly making a reality check: if the Buddhist understanding of the nature of reality is correct, shouldn't someone in the West have stumbled on it too? Over a dozen classes later, I still hadn't found what I set out looking for. But in the process of trying to replicate a Buddhist worldview within a Western understanding of the world, I discovered something more important—that such an effort is misguided. The Western tradition could offer something much more valuable to my practice than confirmation of my intuitions—Buddhist or otherwise. It could teach me how to question them.

Challenging my own assumptions might seem like a strange way to develop faith in my religion, so let me give an example. One day I stumbled on an essay by the anthropologist Clifford Geertz about the nature of his field. Most people know that anthropologists try to make sense of cultures that are often very alien to their own. But there is a common impression, writes Geertz, that they go about their task primarily by means of objective study: “establishing rapport, selecting informants, transcribing texts, taking genealogies, mapping fields, keeping a diary, and so on.” Yet the heart of the work, he insists, is in fact *interpretation*. To illustrate, Geertz draws an example from the British philosopher Gilbert Ryle:

Consider, he [Ryle] says, two boys rapidly contracting the eyelids of their right eyes. In one, this is an involuntary twitch; in the other, a conspiratorial signal to a friend. The two movements are, as movements, identical; from an I-am-a-camera, “phenomenalistic” observation of them alone, one could not tell which was twitch and which was wink, or indeed whether both or either was twitch or wink. Yet the difference, however unphotographable, between a twitch and a wink is vast, as anyone unfortunate enough to have had the first taken for the second knows. The winker is communicating, and indeed communicating in a quite precise and special way: (1) deliberately, (2) to someone in particular, (3) to impart a particular message, (4) according to a socially established code, and (5) without cognizance of the rest of the company. As Ryle points out, the winker has

not done two [separate] things, contracted his eyelids and winked, while the twitcher has done only one, contracted his eyelids. Contracting your eyelids on purpose when there exists a public code in which so doing counts as a conspiratorial signal is winking.

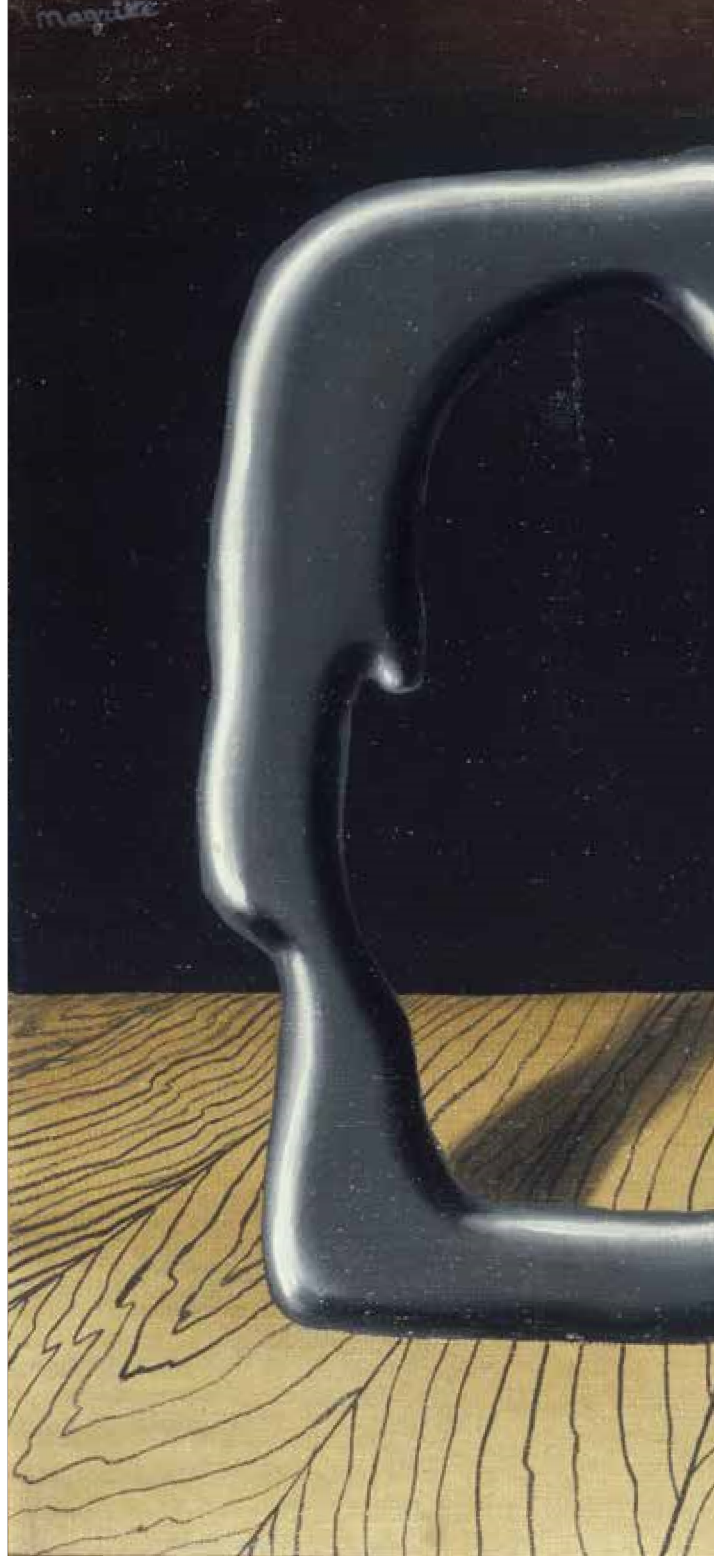
(“Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture”)

Geertz’s point is clear. Humans don’t move like automatons. They act meaningfully. To understand the meaning of what they do, you have to know the context for their actions, because meaning is *always* contextual.

Later, when I sat down to my practice, I was still thinking about Geertz’s essay—and something simply clicked. I realized I had been impatient with the Buddhist tradition of motivating and dedicating because I assumed that a dharma teaching or meditation practice could stand alone. I had been confused about the nature of meaning, so I was applying a scientific kind of analytic thinking—by which I took for granted that removing something from its context is how you better understand its essence—to a type of object that, by its nature, resists decontextualization. When it comes to understanding what humans are up to, Geertz points out, “most of what we need to comprehend a particular event, ritual, custom, idea or whatever is insinuated as background information before the thing itself is directly examined.” Like opening and closing an eye, spiritual actions have no meaning or efficacy in and of themselves. As someone grounded in a tradition, Lama Zopa worked from the premise that keeping his students awake all night could either be torturing them or leading to their enlightenment, depending on their motivation; hence his exhaustive framing.

As modern Western Buddhists confronting an ancient Eastern religion, we are meeting a vastly different world. How do we navigate this challenge? Given that our sensibilities have been shaped by our modern knowledge of history, science, and pluralism, it isn’t easy—indeed, it may not even be possible—for us to abandon our own worldview and naively exchange it for a new one. If we are honest with ourselves, we cannot overlook the fact that traditional Buddhism and modernity have jarring contradictions. But if our solution then is just to lift from the tradition the teachings that make sense to us, while remaining unaware of both the context in which the teachings were given and our own blind spots in appropriating them, we risk getting the message wrong. We might even reinforce the very things that are problematic about ourselves and our society that the teachings are meant to subvert. The sociologist of religion Robert Bellah warned in a 2004 interview with *Tricycle*:

Zen Buddhism began in Japan at a time when strong social structures hemmed in individuals on every side. The family you were born to determined most of your life chances. Buddhism was a way to step outside these constricting structures. Becoming a monk was called *shukke*, literally, “leaving the family.” We live in an almost completely opposite kind of society, where all institutions are weak and the family is in shambles. You don’t need Buddhism to “leave the family.” To emphasize primarily the individualistic side of Buddhism



RENÉ MAGRITTE, *LE BRISÉ-LUMIÈRE*, 1931.
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(especially Zen) in America is only to contribute to our pathology, not ameliorate it.



Even to begin navigating differences requires that we see clearly what the differences are. As Bellah shows, seeing those differences depends on first understanding Buddhist tradition on its own terms. And to get there necessitates becoming aware of a whole slew of tacit assumptions that could be biasing our interpretation. In short, if our goal is to understand Buddhism accurately and to integrate it into our own lives authentically, we have to develop deep understanding both of Buddhist tradition *and* of ourselves. But how?

Coming to understand the cultural and historical factors biasing our beliefs, attitudes, and ways of thinking is like setting out on a

journey on a road that stretches back behind rather than out before us. To walk this road is to retrace the *conditions of possibility* for our experience: taken-for-granted factors that both facilitate and shape it—the pre-reflective, the implicit, the pregiven—what Geertz referred to as “whatever is insinuated as background information before the thing itself is directly examined.”

This background includes assumptions about existential fundamentals like the nature of externality and internality, the self, time, knowledge, and truth. It includes bodily assumptions: the know-how humans have that allows them—without having to think about it—to climb over obstacles or pass through open doors or, for that matter, recognize a wink. It includes social and

linguistic conventions; moral, ethical, and religious norms; political ideologies of gender, race, class, power, and authority; and personal history. In short, background includes everything we *don't* see in order to see a particular thing. It is vast, inchoate, and inexhaustible.

Background is hard to identify because we're embedded in it, but it lights up when it hits up against difference. The meeting of modernity with Buddhism can illuminate this background territory on both sides. When that happens, as self-evident as our own background convictions may have seemed until then, it is important to keep in mind that they have not been established as "true" or "false"; they are "taken for granted," and that means something very different. Just as axioms in geometry are not themselves proven but are the basis for proof, background is what we rely on when we make judgments like truth and falsity. Background assumptions are in this sense like rules of a game: someone playing by different rules isn't necessarily playing our game wrong—sometimes they are playing a different game.

IF WE MISTAKE UNQUESTIONED CONVICTIONS TO BE TRUTHS ABOUT THE EXTERNAL WORLD, WE LIVE THEM AS IDEOLOGIES.

materialist convictions. (We do, after all, have the same kinds of bodies.) We make this mistake when we imagine that our Western tradition and the Buddhist tradition are each monolithic and that the Western tradition means science. Knowing that both Buddhism and science investigate "how things are," we assume

If we mistake unquestioned convictions to be truths about the external world, we live them as ideologies. Any recovered alcoholic knows that the first step toward shaking an addiction is recognizing you have one. But as many scholars of modernity have observed, when it comes to confronting their own ideological addictions, modern Westerners tend to be particularly lacking in self-awareness.

There is a good reason for this. As post-Cartesian rationalists, we imagine ourselves to be competent knowers; and unless we give the question of "what it means to know" some critical thought, we might assume that knowing is like holding a mindmirror up to the world—that the images in the mind reflect the objective facts. This picture of knowing takes background territory off the map, because we imagine that those mind-images are direct, unmediated, unframed, and literal—that they reflect the external world *just the way it is*. In short, we assume that we don't have any assumptions. The French philosopher and sociologist of science Bruno Latour famously described it this way: "A Modern is someone who believes that others believe." A modern Buddhist, in Latour's sense, is someone who believes that Asian forms of Buddhism carry the "baggage" of their host cultures but who remains unreflective about the assumptions that shape his or her own modern adaptations.

We also underestimate the differences we are bridging. We tend to think that people everywhere are basically the same. We don't see this mistake in part because it aligns with our deep field of phenomenology, which is an approach to the study of human experience and consciousness. Husserl thought deeply about how we come to know what we know. Is it really true that the world exists in the way it appears and that the mind is passively and reliably mirroring it? (Husserl called this commonsense notion

they are both engaged in discovering objective facts. Then we think that what we need to do to bring them together is to locate the common ground. But if we simply assume that the Western tradition means science, we overlook that Western thought also includes *critiques* of science, and, further, we neglect Western literature, the arts, the humanities, and (ironically) religion; we also ignore the tremendous pluralism within Buddhism. But what makes this picture of sameness particularly misleading is that it compels us to imagine that differences are extraneous—that they are *what we get rid of* to better understand Buddhist tradition. And if we assume *that*, we never take the first step on the journey to deep understanding. This journey is going to be, as Geertz describes, "a descent into the swirl of particular incident, particular politics, particular voices, particular traditions, and particular arguments, a movement across the grain of difference and along the lines of dispute." Such an investigation, he warns, "is indeed disorienting and spoils the prospect of abiding order." But it may also, he has written, "prove the surer path toward understanding."

In this regard, we can follow the footsteps of great thinkers from our native Western intellectual tradition, such as the German philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859–1938), founder of the

"the natural attitude.") Did he know that for sure? If not, was *any* knowledge rock-hard certain? He wondered if maybe the structure of the mind itself shapes what we know, as his predecessor Immanuel Kant had suggested. If that were the case, how could we be certain of *that*? In this questioning, Husserl faced a chicken-or-the-egg dilemma: the natural attitude took for granted that reliable knowledge of the external world was possible, but it was precisely the possibility of reliable knowledge that Husserl was questioning. He couldn't test whether or not the natural attitude was true if he had to rely on the natural attitude to do the testing.

Husserl reasoned that he could not be sure whether objects existed out in the world independently of his mind; after all, he could be hallucinating them. But he could be certain that the objects in his consciousness appeared *as though* they were in the world. So in the interest of gaining knowledge more certain than any the natural attitude could provide, he decided to put aside the question of whether experiences match external reality and instead home in on the experiences themselves *as people experience them*. Through this technique of bracketing the natural attitude, Husserl set aside third-person research methodologies and in their place developed rigorous methods to study experience from the first-person point of view. His appeal to go "back to the things themselves" is an invocation to approach experience in this direct, fresh, and open-minded way. For Western Buddhists who really want to listen to what Buddhist tradition is saying, Husserl gives us powerful intellectual tools: legitimate reasons and practical methods for paying attention to what an experience might *mean* without first insisting that it prove itself to be objectively real or scientifically verifiable.

To better understand the implications of phenomenology for

Buddhists, I turned to a brilliant phenomenological theorist who is an expert on Husserl—Amedeo Giorgi. For 50 years, Giorgi has pioneered the introduction of phenomenological perspectives into the field of psychology. He codeveloped the very first phenomenological psychology doctoral program in the United States at Duquesne University starting in 1962 and then initiated a similar program at Saybrook University in 1986. Retired, widowed, and now in his eighties, Giorgi graciously welcomed me to the studio apartment he shares with his 125-pound jet-black Newfoundland named Viking. We met several times over a period of months.

At our first meeting, Giorgi told me right away that he didn't know anything about Buddhism. So as we sat down, I told him why I had come.

I briefed him about the challenge Western Buddhists

same way the physical world is. Approaching humans with the same assumptions, methods, and goals that worked on atoms, galaxies, or cells is like using a hammer to pound in a screw—it is just not the right tool for the job.

"We need to start with a better conception of what it is to be human," he said, "one that gives humanness everything that belongs to it. And then create the methods to study *that* adequately. The mainstream scientific tradition puts the cart before the horse." He gestured with his hands, one in front of the other. "We know what science is, so we apply these methods to humans. Of course you don't miss entirely studying human phenomena with a natural science approach, but in my view you get trivial information."

Giorgi wasn't denying that human beings are *in part* physical. What he was objecting to was the fallacy of starting an inquiry into what humans are with an assumption of already knowing what they are—that is, that they are *only* physical. Because the starting assumptions define the scope of the inquiry, he noted, a lot of things that people actually experience get left out. For example, he

WHETHER ON THE CUSHION OR IN THE LABORATORY, BUDDHISM AND SCIENCE RESIST AN EASY FIT.

have in reconciling our Buddhist perspective with a modern understanding "Because human beings are different from physical objects," he stated matter-of-factly. "They have consciousness!"

Humans live in a realm of meaning, values, ethics, and purpose, Giorgi explained. And that is not made intelligible in the of the world. Many Buddhists, I explained, assume that means reading a Buddhist worldview through a scientific one. This assumption that "to be Western and modern means to be scientific" also reigns in academia, I told him, where the most fashionable interlocutor for Buddhism today is neuroscience. And then I pointed out the problem: whether on the cushion or in the laboratory, Buddhism and science resist an easy fit. A good deal of Buddhism—even including, ironically, the very notion of buddhahood—doesn't lend itself to scientific validation or materialist empiricism. Consequently, to make Buddhism fit with what is perceived to be our best knowledge of the world, much of what constitutes the Buddhist tradition itself needs to be dismissed. In the process, this rich tradition gets reduced to a set of concepts and techniques stripped of the context that gave them meaning. I was looking for some other way to open the deadlock between Buddhism and modernity, I told Giorgi, and I thought Husserl's thinking might hold a key.

Giorgi listened to all this closely. The moment I finished, he launched into a reply.

There's a limitation built into science, he explained. What we usually think of as science is physical, or natural, science—an empirical discipline that originated in the study of the physical world. When natural science uses the same quantitative and experimental approach that rendered physical phenomena intelligible to try to make sense of human phenomena like culture, psychology, or religion, it falls short.

But why?

Part of the problem, Giorgi explained, is that natural scientists are used to dealing with objects like stars and rocks. So

said, "Suppose I want to say that human beings have consciousness or a kind of spirit. 'Nope! That's mysterious. You're going into another realm.' 'Oh, well then, how about the brain?' 'Oh, that is OK.'"

they treat human beings like every other object they study, disregarding the fact that humans are not only objects, they are also subjects. To the extent that natural science is committed to an objective, view-from-nowhere, third-person approach, the things that matter most about humans—like their inner life, motivations, ethics, and values—remain elusive.

"Scientists have presuppositions that transform what they're studying into something they're familiar with," Giorgi said, "so they undersell consciousness. They don't understand its truly unique capabilities and how different it really is from nature. And this is why Husserl says 'Back to the things themselves.' Go back to the phenomena as they present themselves; you have to deal with them un-prejudicially."

Giorgi is a proponent of an intellectual tradition called human science, which originated in late 19th-century European philosophy with the German philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey. Human science was developed by a long progression of esteemed thinkers, including some of the most innovative and heavy-hitting theorists of the Western philosophical tradition, such as Husserl, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Max Weber, Walter Benjamin, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Paul Ricoeur. Phenomenology comes from human science, as does modern hermeneutics (the study of the nature of interpretation), and the tradition has influenced a wide range of fields in the humanities and social sciences.

(continued on page 100)

Recognizing the shortcomings of applying a natural science approach to human beings, these thinkers developed a science specifically tailored to the task. Like natural science, human science seeks knowledge that is secure, replicable, and verifiable. But it starts out with nonmaterialist assumptions, and it uses different methods—qualitative rather than quantitative ones. “Human science explicitly deals with human cultural and social worlds; natural science deals with nature,” Giorgi explained. “Humans are ambiguous—some people say, ‘humans are just natural, we just find ourselves in the world like trees and stones, so why are you making a special category?’ Human scientists say, ‘There is a certain kind of consciousness in the case of humans that is difficult to subsume under the categories of nature. So we feel that this requires a different kind of thinking, a different kind of describing, and a different kind of analysis.’”

Intellectual movements on occasion drop bombshell ideas so powerful their impact overturns an entire field and clears new vistas for thinkers across disciplines. Freud’s notion of the unconscious, for example, was one of these high-impact ideas. Husserl’s bombshell was the *lifeworld* [*Lebenswelt*].

“There are several meanings in Husserl,” Giorgi told me, “but the basic meaning of lifeworld is *the ordinary world as we live it in everyday life*. Prescientific. Pre-any-specialization whatsoever. You and I meeting at the door was a lifeworld experience. You were looking around for me, checking if this is the right apartment; and I was looking out for you. We met and we said hello. That’s lifeworld.”

We’re used to thinking of the world as the *sum of all that exists*—meaning all that exists in a non-imaginary, scientifically verifiable, and objectively real sort of way. Galaxies are in the universe;

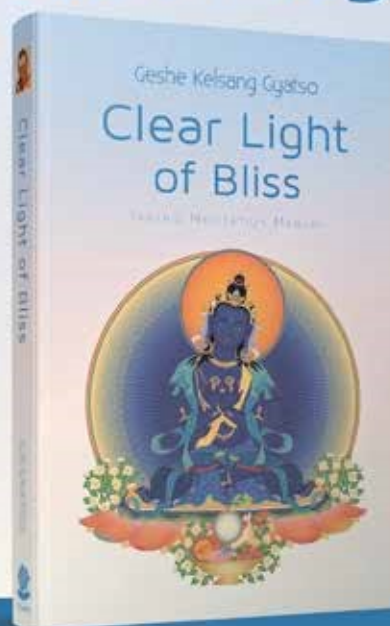
unicorns are not. But the lifeworld is bigger than that, Giorgi told me. Remember that Husserl bracketed the question of the objective reality of experiences; to discover what could be known with certainty, he took out of play the notion of “really there” or “not really there.” The totality he was interested in was the *sum total of possible experiences*, including, said Giorgi, “everything that people can even imagine.” That totality includes the objective world plus the subjective one. It also includes the more primordial realm of the conditions of possibility that give rise to subjectivity and objectivity in the first place, and so—importantly—it puts background territory back onto the map.

“For Husserl the lifeworld is the basis of anything else you want to do,” Giorgi explained. “The world of science presupposes the lifeworld. The world of economics presupposes the lifeworld. The world of entertainment presupposes it. So the lifeworld is that most fundamental everyday life experience that one has. It is the absolute ground of any other world that may develop.”

From Husserl’s perspective, any specialized world is derived from the lifeworld. Specialized worlds have certain criteria that define them, and those criteria are always narrower than lifeworld criteria. This perspective has enormous implications for science because it shows up the assumptions that frame natural science as exactly that—assumptions. For example, “Say I’m going to be a natural scientist,” Giorgi said, “then all of a sudden I’ve got certain presuppositions, like ‘The really real is the physical.’”

The fact that specialized worlds are founded on presupposi-

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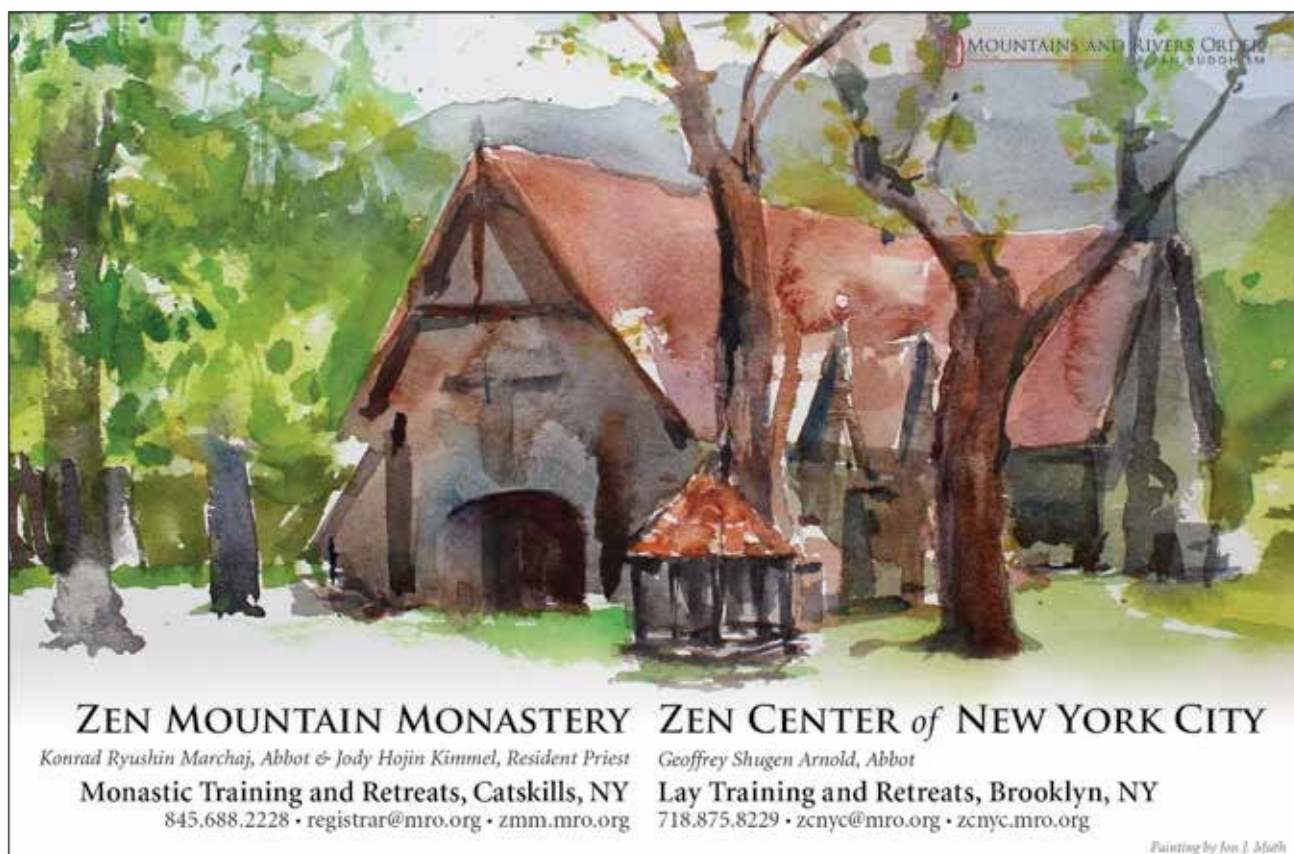
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tions isn't the problem. Assumptions shape a sub-world, define it, and enable it to function. The problem comes, said Giorgi, when people try to put the results of the specialized world back into the everyday world, which is richer. He shrugged. "Sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't."

"You are talking about a plural understanding of worlds, which is not necessarily an assumption that natural science would share," I said. "But how does the world of natural science become the whole world for many scientists?"

"They make it a privileged world," he said, "so that unless you meet scientific criteria, they are not going to take you seriously. And there are explicit movements like positivism that make statements like 'Unless it's perceptually given to me or unless I can experiment with it then I'm not going to take it seriously.' Somebody has an out of the ordinary experience and they'll just say, 'That's not possible. Science doesn't understand that, so I'm going to dismiss it.'" Giorgi rested his chin on his fingers thoughtfully. "But even ordinary experiences like friendship are difficult for natural science to account for in a way that isn't reductionist. They might try to explain it physiologically, for example: two rats like to touch each other because it is rewarding, so that is why they became friends."

We sat in silence for few minutes. So this was Husserl's great accomplishment. He maintained the credibility of natural science while unseating its sovereignty, replacing it on a level ground of authority with other fields of knowledge, and opening a new space for pluralism that escapes the

scourge of relativism. But I still wondered: how does natural science—one particular derivative model of the world—then get reapplied back over all worlds?

"It is established as a priority over the lifeworld. What happens in natural science is 'really real' and what's in the lifeworld is not." Phenomenology reverses that, Giorgi explained. "Phenomenology says, 'No, the primary thing is the *lifeworld*, and *science* is a derived world.' He stood up to end our meeting. "Let me put it this way," he said. "We're beings in the world. 'World' means everything. It means nature, humans, consciousness—anything you can find there. How do we get nature? World minus all consciousness, all subjectivity, gives you physical nature. Well, then how are you going to go from physical nature back to subjectivity, when you have removed subjectivity? But that's exactly what psychology [conceived as a natural science] is trying to do. They're saying subjectivity is a being of *nature*. No, subjectivity is a being in the world. You need *worldness*, which means consciousness, spirituality, morality, values—and whatever else you want to have—because the whole shebang is there in 'world.' The initial situation is *world*, not nature."

That afternoon on the long drive home from my meeting with Giorgi, I was thinking over what he had said about how the logic and conventions of science sometimes get applied to areas of the lifeworld in ways that are inappropriate. And I fell into a Husserl-inspired domino swoop of backward-step thinking. When it started, I was recalling the problem I had brought to Giorgi—how Buddhism is getting read through a scientific worldview in its transmission to the West. Then I remembered how when I returned from Nepal I was seeking to confirm a Bud-

dhist worldview within a Western one; and it occurred to me now to wonder whether reading Buddhism through a scientific lens might not be another way of trying to do the same thing. The only alternative to seeking confirmation of one worldview within another seemed to be to try to find common ground between them. But this approach, too, felt similar—it wanted to get both sides into accord, to end up with them standing on the same ground. All these approaches dead-end for different reasons, I noted, but they all feel unsatisfactory in the same sort of way. What was it that felt off? For many miles, my mind spun around in circles. When I arrived home, I sat in the car for a while in the driveway, still mulling the problem over.

Gradually it dawned on me: *all of these approaches try to sort out who is right.*

Once I saw that, I could take another thinking-step backward. I asked myself, why do we assume that coming up with a single right answer is what counts as an adequate solution to the problem of navigating different worldviews?

Perhaps the reason is that we take for granted that the question “What does it mean to navigate different points of view successfully?” is a *scientific* one. In natural science, what counts as navigating different points of view successfully is figuring out which one is correct. (If you have multiple answers to the same scientific question, you don’t call it a solution; you call it a paradox.) But in the *human* realm, navigating difference successfully isn’t about getting the correct answer, as anyone who has ever “won the argument but lost the friendship” knows.

And then I recalled Geertz’s statement about what it was that anthropologists do, and I finally understood what he meant when he said that navigating different points of view is not a matter of objective study, but a matter of interpreting meaning. This mistake is such a familiar one that it had been hard for me to see, even

when Geertz had pointed it out so clearly. It is a mistake I make in everyday life, for example, in my interactions with my partner. Oftentimes when our points of view differ, I fall into one-correct-answer thinking: *She’s got it wrong.* But predictably, from her point of view the problem is on *my* side. At those moments of one-correct-answer thinking, it is very difficult to see how incompatible points of view can be reconciled. But when we talk further and she shows me how she arrived at her standpoint, I may see how it makes sense, given her background. To get to that understanding, I need to reflect on my own assumptions: What was I taking for granted that made her position a problem? The moment I see the nature and source of our difference, the tension dissipates. Her point of view opens a new possibility for me. My world gets bigger.

If navigating the confrontation of Western modernity with Buddhism is a different kind of problem than we previously imagined, it also requires different sorts of skills. Logical thinking might help us navigate the scientific sphere, for example, but it can’t be what we rely on here because what counts as logical depends on the criteria of specialized worlds. (For example, in a traditional Buddhist world, it is entirely logical to use this life to prepare for the next one. In a materialist world in which there are no future lives, using this life to prepare for the next isn’t bad logic; it is not logic at all.) What dialogue with tradition requires

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is *conversation skills*.

Navigating conversation successfully calls for showing up in our entirety and inviting our dialogue partner to do the same—which means putting background assumptions on the table. It calls for learning how to listen, which means allowing Buddhist tradition to speak from its own ground while we bracket our preconceptions, pay attention respectfully, and confirm that we understood accurately. Then it calls for knowing how to reflect on how what we've just heard jibes with our own sense of things. In this way, encountering the tradition can show us that what we are taking for granted may be very different. When those background differences light up, they become—in this context—not obstacles to understanding but the conditions of possibility for it; it is precisely because the modern Western and traditional Buddhist worldviews have very different background assumptions that they can illuminate each other. And once an assumption is illuminated as such, when we see it as one way—rather than *the way*—for things to be, then we are up to something new: relinquishing certainties rather than confirming them. This is a way forward for Buddhism and modernity that isn't about sorting out who is right: both worlds meet each other in their entirety and are challenged, enriched, and expanded by what the German hermeneutic philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer called “a fusion of horizons.”

understanding the background that makes any particular affirmation possible.

So human science can shine a light on the particular ways in which any tradition, religious or secular, affirms meaning; it places them all in a radically new context not accounted for by their own self-understandings. It opens the way for individuals and communities to engage traditions in a dialogue that is both affirming and critical; and it opens those traditions to dialogue with other forms of knowledge.

In every age and culture, certain qualities emerge as especially esteemed virtues, while qualities that were once virtues no longer hold the same power or significance. Buddhism is not exempt from this process. In our global age of competing religions, incommensurate value systems, and widely divergent cultures all bumping up against one another, the capacity for sympathetic understanding might well emerge from being something barely mentioned in any tradition to being a primary virtue and a characteristic of a mature consciousness. This ability to relate to what is alien on its own terms and in its own framework—and to navigate a multiplicity of contexts with a kind of multilingual fluency—is consistent with a Buddhist outlook and with Buddhist values like compassion, sympathetic joy, dependent origination, and nonattachment to views. But there is something new about it as well, something that is called forth by the world we find ourselves in. It is both a demand and an opening. ▼

Whereas any religion, like Buddhism, is about affirming *particular* meanings, human science is about

Linda Heuman is a *Tricycle* contributing editor. Her most recent piece was “The Embodied Mind,” Fall 2014.

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Led by **James Baraz**, co-founder of Spirit Rock Meditation Center

Inspiring guest speakers include:

**Mark Coleman • Vinny Ferraro • Linda Graham • Rick Hanson • Thupten Jinpa
Dacher Keltner • Chade Meng Tan • Carole Pertofsky • Shauna Shapiro
Thanissara • Anam Thubten Rinpoche**

“I have seen the most miraculous changes in my life since beginning this course. I cannot thank you enough.” - Sarah L.

Course starts in February. Sign up today!

For information and registration visit: www.awakeningjoy.info

