Interview with Richard Gombrich

Courses Karma & Rebirth

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Skype interview with Richard Gombrich, 19th September 2014

Transcript of video recording

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Richard Gombrich (G); Ajahn Brahmali (B); Ajahn Sujato (S)

B: Our first question is about rebirth rather than karma, specifically about the context for the Buddha's views on rebirth. Are the earliest Buddhist ideas about rebirth similar or different from other ideas of rebirth that were prevalent at the time, such as the Brahmanical and Jaina ideas?

G: Well, maybe seen from over 2½ millennia away and half way around the world they do look a bit similar. Looked at closer, they look extremely different, and the Buddhist ideas are quite revolutionary.

You will forgive me if I just remark at the outset that everything I'm going to say is in my book What the Buddha Thought [Ed.: Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies Monographs, Equinox Publishing, 2009]. And I don't think I know anything which isn't in the book. I've also looked at the book to try to remember what I know, and I don't think there's anything in the book which I now disagree with.

[Rebirth]

As with most questions, indeed, it's helpful to look at the antecedents and to give a kind of sketch of how it all developed. There has been a lot of progress in this field over the last quarter century, mainly because of a Polish Sanskritist called Joana Jurewicz who reinterpreted, I think totally successfully, a hymn in the tenth book – that's the last book – of the Rig Veda, the funeral hymn. I think it's absolutely certain that she's right: it fits the grammar, and it also makes sense of the whole early history of Indian religion in this area.

Incidentally, one has to mention first, because you're bound to get questions about this, that there's nothing about women there whatsoever. We aren't told anything about what happens to women, and they are of no interest to the authors of the texts. It's about men.

We are told that men, when they die, go to join people called the fathers, in other words their paternal ancestors, who are in some kind of heaven about which we have no details, but it seems to be in or near the sun, and this is obviously quite pleasant. They are only allowed to be there for a certain amount of time, and then they come back in the rain. The rain produces barley, people eat the barley, it goes into semen (the semen isn't actually mentioned in the Rig Veda, but a little later), and that leads to their rebirth.

We have here a binary cosmology, a cosmology in which there are two worlds, and you oscillate between the two. In his great book on karma and rebirth Gananath Obeyesekere [Ed.: Motilal Banarsidass, 2005] showed that this picture – people believing that there are two worlds, this one and the other one, and when you die in one you get born in the other, and this can go on for ever – is very widespread. It's found on almost every continent in ancient times. There are certain variants, but that's the basic picture.

Inherent to this picture is that it's not ethicised. That is, whether you are a good guy or a bad guy, makes no difference at all. This is an idea which comes from small scale communities where everybody knows everybody; they know who's good and who's bad. If people are bad, they're likely to be punished for it in this life. So you don't have to wait for something to happen in some other world in order for people to get their comeuppance, if they've done something horrible. There's much more social control as you would expect in a face to face community.

It's very important to get this idea of a binary cosmology – this world and the other world – which is archaic and very widespread, and certainly existed in ancient India. It's very interesting to note that in a few places in the Pali Canon, particularly some verses in the Dhammapada, which I quote in my book, there is talk of this world and the other. And sometimes, if you do good for instance, it's referred to as being rewarded ubhayattha, in both places. This also occurs in prose texts and so on, and it's obviously using the general way that people talk about these things. It's a simple and obvious way of talking about these things.

One major line to follow through is at what point ethics gets introduced into this picture. Ethics presumably gets introduced once you are no longer living in these small scale communities. You start worrying: "Do the good people and the bad people meet exactly the same fate?" And then a division is made: you can go either to a good place or to a bad place. Notice, this doesn't yet mean you perform ethical or unethical

actions in that other place. Rather, you do your stuff in this world, you die, and you go to another place, which is nice or nasty, according to whether you did good or bad. But then you come back and you start over again, just as in the Rig Veda. There are terms for this in Sanskrit, which I give in the book: there is the place of action, karma-bhūmi, and then there's the place of result.

Now that seems to have been quite a developed idea even before the Buddha, and a very good example of it – with it's own idiosyncrasies, of course – is found in Jainism. Jainism already has this idea that – to repeat it very rapidly – you lead a certain kind of life in this world, and you are then reborn according to what you did, and when the rewards or punishments have happened, you come back. But then Jainism has something else as well, and that is the idea that this going on forever is intolerable, and there should be a third way, a way out, an escape from rebirth.

This is also in the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad, for the first time. The Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad, which is the oldest and longest of the Upaniṣads, has an account of what happens to people at death, which is known as the five fires doctrine for reasons we need not go into here. This account basically divides people into three groups at death: those who have a nice form of rebirth, those who have a nasty form of rebirth, and those who have no rebirth at all, which for the first time is represented as an ideal. Both the Jains and the Upaniṣads already have this idea of saṁsāra – which is derived from an intensive form of the verb sār, "to go" – that you have to keep going and going. Now for the first time there is the possibility of an escape from saṁsāra. So you move from a binary cosmology to a trinary cosmology: there's this location, there's the next world, and there's the location of no location, if you like. You've managed to escape completely. That's one thread.

[Karma]

Intermingled with this, interwoven with it, is a second thread, and that's karma. What is meant by karma? This is, of course, crucial for Buddhism, and here the Buddha made his great original contribution. Karma, as you know, is a very simple and common word: a verbal noun meaning doing or making. It just means a deed or action or act. And the ordinary word for an agent, somebody who does something, is kartṛ, which is directly connected with karma and so on. And then it just comes from the logic of the situation that although karma can be used for any action – if I do this, this is also karma – when talking religion or philosophy, it refers to an action which is significant. Once you have this ethicisation creeping in – the idea that it matters whether you are good or bad – then karma is an act that you should do or shouldn't do. It's a good or a bad act.

Now for the Brahmins – right up until 2014 and probably for ever more – what you should do is all laid down in the books, and it depends on who you are. They are mainly concerned with being a male, of course, and it's laid down for a Brahmin male exactly what he should do, even before he's in a position to really do anything, while he's still in the womb.

And very important, as brought out a bit in my book, perhaps not enough, is the final act, the funeral. You have to have a correct funeral; that's extremely important. But we need not go into why now. So your last sort of act is to offer yourself on the funeral pyre, which means you offer your body into the fire. Of course you need a little help – you're dead and somebody has to put you there – but otherwise it's your act. That's already the case in the Rig Veda obviously. As you were burnt, the resultant smoke was a visible sign that you were going up into heaven. So it's essential that you do this.

But basically, you see, the funeral is always sort of a good point to remember and lay hold of. Because it's ritual acts which count, if you do the right thing, if you get your body on the pyre at the right time and in right place and so on, and you get properly burnt, then good and bad and all that stuff is absolutely irrelevant. The people who do it may absolutely hate you and sort of spit on you behind your back, and you may be a child molester and so on and so forth, but if you get the right funeral you will be on course. The best way to think of it is that you have to be on track.

Now what goes with karma, each act being a ritual act, is finite. I mean, we know when it starts and we know when it finishes. And this is often made quite explicit in Brahmin ritual. For instance, when you start a ritual act, whether it's a daily one, or a life-cycle act or whatever, you usually say a kind of signing on. You say, "I, Richard Gombrich, at 11:15 on Friday the 19th of September, am now performing the such and such." You may add in order to do so and so – that's a special kind of ritual, a kāmya ritual – or you may not do that because it's obvious. And you do it in order to be who you are: you fulfil your essence, your nature and so on, by doing these acts.

And they are often said to be purificatory, because many of them, particularly the daily ones like cleaning yourself after you've been to the toilet, are to get rid of the impurities inherent in the human condition – the muck that comes out with you when you're born from your mother, the faeces when you go to the toilet and so on. You get rid of impurities all the time. They are rituals and many of them are negative.

But the most important point about them being rituals is that they are finite. And therefore their results are finite. And if you do all the right things, ending with the funeral, keeping on track, that has excellent results for you: you are on track to go to heaven and join your fraternal ancestors, but it's still finite. And the finiteness of those acts are referred to for instance in the Tevijjā Sutta, and they are distinct from the infiniteness of what the Buddha is recommending, like love. So every karma is finite. That's terribly important.

Now how this works is also presented to us, in a less formal way, through the vocabulary of what is clearly a kind of metaphor taken from what goes on in agriculture. This is not the very earliest stuff, but it's there by the time of the Buddha, and is very important in later Buddhism, and it's there in Jainism. Karma begins with a seed, that's the beginning, often called the undertaking: you plant the seed, and what happens under the ground is called the adṛṣṭa, the unseen – we can't see it, and we don't know exactly what happens. But although we have to accept that we don't quite understand it, it matures, which is often called cooked – a metaphor for matures – and out comes the vipāka or the result – and I know you both know the language – which is the phala, the fruit, which is the result of the karma. That comes out. And the phala is so to speak the harvest, what you get from it. But you see it is finite. Every harvest is finite. Now that's where of course the Buddha turned everything on its head. And he did so by a couple of major moves which are interconnected.

So karma starts off as being ritual and then, before the Buddha comes along, we get the idea that perhaps there's more than ritual, something else than ritual. The people who developed that idea thoroughly were the Jains, because the Jains were clearly people from a very different stratum of society, a lower stratum. And the Jains are very hostile to Brahmins. They have some stories where they exult in beating Brahmins

up. The Brahmins come along and do a sacrifice, which is horror for the Jains, of course, as it is for Buddhists, because they're being violent to an animal. The Jains, of course, are not allowed themselves to beat Brahmins up, but they have the satisfaction that they have guardian spirits, yakshas and so on, who come and do the job for them, and they very much enjoy seeing the Brahmins getting punched black and blue. So the Jains have the idea that actually Brahmin rituals are rubbish and irrelevant, and they're bad because they do harm through the animal sacrifices and so on. They're very anti Brahmin rituals.

[Karma and intention]

The Buddha isn't quite like that, but just as effective, because he says ritual is absolutely irrelevant. Totally irrelevant! It's neither good nor bad; it's a set of meaningless acts because all that matters is your intention. And that was a HUGE shift from Jainism! Jainism is still very naive and simple about this: karma is an act. It's an act is an act is an act. As with the funeral or something, it's not a question of what you're thinking; it's what you're doing, which is usually bad because you're treading on some unhappy insect on the ground or something and killing it. The fact that you didn't mean to isn't really relevant for the Jains. You're doing bad acts all the time. This is a very, very difficult religion to live by, as history has shown. And it's quite astonishing that it has even survived until now. But it's only carried out to its full extent by a tiny handful of men and women. The rest is just sort of lay support.

But the Buddha says, "No, by karma I mean intention". The essence of any act is in the mind. Whether it's physical action, speech or thought, the essence is always in the mind. As I've written in several places, that's just about like saying, "Well, by black I'm going to mean white, or by right I'm going to mean left, or by up I'm going to mean down". It's taking the word "action" and saying, "cetanā ahaṁ bhikkhave kammaṁ vadāmi", "Oh monks, what I call karma is intention". And that one little sentence in the Aṅguttara Nikāya is the greatest revolution in human history, so to speak. If you accept that, everything else crumbles and it has to be rearranged and built up again.

If everything is due to intention, Buddhism must rest on the idea that there is free will – because intention is the basic property of a sentient being. But you've got to balance that against the Buddhist idea of causation – which people get very excited about, not wrongly – the idea that nothing exists without a cause. But he left a kind of hole in the middle of the argument there, because he says that everything has a cause and yet intention is intention. So there may be subsidiary causes for your intention, but ultimately you are responsible. So it's like he's left a big space in the middle – very wisely, because nobody has yet solved the problem of free will, have they? He's absolutely eliminated the possibility that we don't have free will because all our morality, our karma, and therefore our biographies, rest on that supposition.

So we must have free will, but on the other hand things can't occur just at random: they're still paṭicca samuppāda, not adhicca samuppāda, they don't occur randomly. So there's an intention which may of course not always be fulfilled. But if you are intending to make a donation at the post office across the road, but you get knocked down by a bus as you're crossing the road in eagerness to make the donation, you still have the good intention, even if you were a bit careless about crossing the road. So somewhere in the middle there is intention.

Of course our biographies, which take us though so many forms of life and so on, illustrate for the Buddha that you build up moral habits, and then you get born in a situation. Say you get born as a carnivore, like a tiger. Well a tiger kills quite a lot if it's going to stay alive. And that isn't good karma for the tiger – although it's not quite as wicked as the way we do things, because we shoot tigers when we don't even need to eat them. But still it's not good. And you're a tiger because you've already built up these violent habits over an infinite number of lives; we don't know how it began. The Buddha would have real trouble explaining things if he hadn't added the nice thing that the beginning of our cycle in saṁsāra is unknowable, and it's infinitely long ago. You can never get back to the original cause of our mental condition. That saves, I think, his whole picture of what's going on.

So suddenly you get the introduction of ethics. Well, it's there with the Jains, and we don't know exactly when it started. Probably Jainism grew up in the same area as the Buddha, in Rajgir and so on, a few generations before the Buddha, as far as we can tell. And then, much better known or more often commented on, it is also in the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad: the brief statement that if you do acts without desire, that's the right thing to do. It doesn't just say good and bad, the expression is you are doing acts without desire. So there too you get the beginning of ethics.

Yet the strange thing is that despite the, shall we say the wonderful example of the Buddhists, the Hindus have never quite got round to this. I mean, to this day in Hinduism there isn't a clear distinction between ethics and ritual. You have to get both right. And they don't really distinguish between them, you see. So, for instance, doing purificatory rituals is just as much part of what they nowadays call eternal Dharma, sanantana Dharma, as being kind to someone. The Hindus have never quite got that sorted out, which doesn't perhaps do them great credit, since they really could've learnt it from the Buddhists.

[Karma and Rituals in Buddhism]

But before we get too smug about that, let's remember that the Buddhists haven't got it right either, because there are these unbelievably silly people out there who think that whether you can be a nun depends on a ritual. So the Buddhists have allowed ritual to creep back in at various places, and they think that it matters, which I think for the Buddha would have been absolutely horrendous. He was concerned, very concerned, with procedures, yes, but in a modern technical, administrative way. He is very concerned that all the monks meet together when something important has to be decided, and that they make the decision unanimously. But that isn't a ritual: it's one way, and not a bad way, of running an institution.

I'm often reminded of that in the Oxford Colleges which are very, very hot on procedure. At first when you come in, at the sort of firebrand aged of 25, you think this is all terribly boring, and why do people spend so much time on procedure. When you get a little bit older – and not necessarily as old as I am – you start realising how important procedure is, especially to pre-empt possibilities of dissatisfaction later and people grumbling and so on. So the Buddha was of course a genius in many ways, and he was an administrative genius, I think. And all that stuff about the kammavāca (Ed.: legal actions of the Sangha that have to be performed according to valid procedures) is very important. But this is quite different from saying you can't be a nun unless you've been through a specific ritual and that it matters which person or body administered that ritual and so on.

[Summary]

I hope that the main line of development is clear. On the one hand, the cosmology is becoming more complex, ethics is introduced and then the idea that perhaps the best thing is to escape from the whole thing anyway and not be reborn at all. Interwoven with that is the line that ritual is not the thing, action is not the thing, it's [thought] that's the thing. And that, of course, is the hallmark of Buddhism … I think that rebirth for the Buddha is a kind of secondary necessity, because the whole thing is predicated on the idea that ultimately – it may take zillions of years – but ultimately the universe is just. If you're a good guy it will lead to good results and so on, or if you're a bad guy it will lead to bad results.

When we read the newspapers and watch TV and so on, people do the most ghastly things and apparently prosper. And we see babies dying of aids. Now how does that fit with the world being a just place? The only possible answer, I think, must be that it's due to [what we did in] a former life, because the baby hasn't had a chance to do anything or have particularly wicked intentions yet. So I think rebirth is needed for the ideas about karma to work. So I can't agree with Stephen Batchelor. I can't agree that you can have a Buddhism without rebirth, without knocking out one of the foundations of the system.

That was a long answer.

S: It was an extremely eloquent description of the historical context. Exactly the kind of thing we were looking for. Thank you for that.

There were a couple of points I wanted to pick up on from what you were saying. It was a long answer, but there were a few things there that were quite striking, which I think perhaps a lot of us don't understand. This is something that I have studied myself. One of the things you mentioned right in the beginning was how physical and organic the process of rebirth was in its original conception. I think that's something that most people today can't really get their heads around, because it's obvious to us that rebirth is going to be about a soul or something like that. But, in fact, in the Bṛhadāraṇyaka, and obviously in earlier texts, it was a very physical process, an organic process.

Another point you made, which was also very interesting, was about the relationship between the ideas of karma and rebirth and the stratification in society, and you mentioned not knowing people. It struck me that another aspect of that would probably be the growing inequality. If you're in a very small, kind of tribal society, there's very little, if any, inequality, and so it makes sense to think that people will go to more or less the same place after they die. And as society gets more stratified, you get rich and poor and so on; these ideas, I think, are related to that.

The other point I wanted to bring up from what you said was the way there's a complex of ideas which moves gradually towards a psychological approach to karma and so on, which we're used to hearing about in Buddhism. One of the claims that we hear people say often is that the Buddha adopted the idea of karma from his surroundings, as if the Buddha had the critical faculties of a nine year old child: that he simply believed unquestioningly everything he was told, and that he was completely incapable of reflecting on it in the way a middle school child is able to. Whereas the reality, of course, is that in the culture of his time there were ideas of karma, but they were complex, evolving and changing, and the Buddha, as with so many things, took it up and revolutionised it. He turned it upside down as you said.

G: Well, I'd like to respond to the last question, very strongly agreeing with you. But, you know, one must generalise that. Well, alright, the Buddha accepted quite a few things the people believed and were saying around him; if he hadn't, nobody would have understood a single word, of course. So you've got to share some language with him.

But the Buddha is the most astounding example of somebody who ... he keeps on saying this, especially in the Dīgha Nikāya. He says, "Tell me what you believe about so and so," and the person does. And then he says, "Yes, yes, yes, splendid. I quite agree with you provided that by when you say left you mean right and provided when you say right you mean left." He's always saying, "Yes, but." So it's not just karma.

Why did he use the word karma? It seems in a way very confusing that he used the word karma when he meant cetanā, intention. But that's in order to try, as it were, to fool people, you know; it's a tactic. This, of course, became known very much later, not in his lifetime, as skill in means. This is the tactic of saying, "Yes, you've got it all right, I agree with you, but perhaps you haven't quite understood the meaning of some of the words you're using."

He doesn't do that just with karma; he does it again and again and again. I mean a very startling example, which I go on a bit about in my book, is the word Brahmin. He says, "Of course, there's such a thing as a Brahmin, a superior kind of person. And you've said yourselves in some of your admirable scriptures that a Brahmin is a person who's upright, kind, etc., etc., etc. Of course, I am a Brahmin, because I'm upright." That must have really annoyed them. "Some of you, I'm terribly sorry to have to tell you, aren't Brahmins at all." So that, you know, is his use of the social metaphor. I think it's chapter 12 in my book … I have a whole chapter about the word Brahmin, some of these social metaphors that he uses.

Another one is his use of the word outcast. Who's an outcast? Well, from the Buddha's point of view it's a person who kills, steals, lies and so on; that's an outcast. "Yes, there are lots of outcasts, but not us." For the Brahmins, of course, the Buddha was an outcast, because he ate food from anybody; that's what an outcast does. According to the Brahmins, your social status after birth is deserved or destroyed by what you eat, whom you accept food from. The Buddha accepted food from anybody. So he was an outcast.

S: That's a major concern in the Bṛhadāraṇyaka. It's constantly talking about food.

G: Indeed. All of the Brahmin scriptures tend to talk a great deal about food, yes. The appetite for food.

As for rebirth, I would think that – I don't know what you find, you have more experience teaching this than I – people find it extremely difficult. One tactic I use is to say, "Well, if you're Christians, you believe in rebirth anyway," but only once. That's more of a joke.

What people really have to get used to is that according to the Buddha we're reborn every second. I mean, all the khandhas are continually changing. The only difference is that there's a rather dramatic change after the funeral. All the other essential parts of you [apart from the body] – including crucially your volition, which is the red thread which runs through everything, in other words your karma – are of course

developing every moment.

That's why I stress so much in my book that the incredible thing the Buddha did was to say that everything is process. It's a way of saying everything changes. He didn't have an exact word for "process", although saṅkhāra can sometimes be translated like that. But the khandhas are not things; they're processes. And our biographies, which stretch though an infinite number of lives, are the processes of our consciousness and the five khandhas. And the crucial one – crucial because it determines where we get reborn – is cetanā [or saṅkhāra], that is, volition.

So for the Buddha rebirth is something that occurs every moment, and that was a VERY new idea. That would have seemed as unintelligible to a Jain or a Brahmin as it would to a gentleman in Oxford or Perth. It's a very, very startling idea, and he didn't even have quite the right language for it, but it's very clear what he meant. We needn't worry about that, but there isn't a single word that exactly means process.

I also say that the Buddha really invented abstraction, abstract thinking. The Jains have some very good ideas, but they were so crude in certain respects, because for them everything was physical, including right and wrong, which were kinds of dust, as it were. And he took their stuff over, but said no, no, no, this won't work. Again, we accept what you say, but actually these are abstractions. That must have been difficult for a lot of people to get their minds round at that time.

B: Richard, I'd like to pick up on one of the things that you mentioned. But before I do that … it occurs to me that when you say there's no word for process in the Pali or Sanskrit language, what about paṭicca samuppāda? Isn't that in a sense a word for process?

G: It refers to process.

B: But it doesn't mean process?

G: Samuppāda, as you know, means arising together, and paṭicca means because of something. So the causal arising together. It is a prime example of a process, just as karma is a prime example of a process, but it isn't a word for process.

B: Fair enough.

I would like to get back to some of things you said about karma. Karma kind of started off with the Brahmins, basically referring to rituals, and the Buddha revolutionised that to a very large extent by giving it an ethical side, a very important ethical side. And then you said that today you find Buddhists doing rituals all over the place. So we have sort of moved back to square one again, we're back where we started. How have we as Buddhists, in a sense, found ourselves in this pickle, where we have re-accepted what we were supposed to reject? What is going on here? Have we failed as monastics in teaching Buddhism? What is your explanation for this?

G: Well, yes, you have. But you can't … If Buddhists in Burma set out to murder their Muslim neighbours, you can't be held responsible for that. Ritual isn't the worst thing they do, I'm afraid. I mean, yes, if you're really fond of a particular religion you're liable to a great deal of disappointment in a way that other people act on it.

Have you failed as monastics? Well, the problem is really that Buddhism has gone so many ways in the modern world. I have direct experience of the fact that there's supposed to be a kind of Buddhist revival in the United States, with all this measuring of the electric charges in your brain to see how kind you are and so on. And for most of those people, I'm not sure if it's even crossed their minds that there's a Sangha in Buddhism. And if you tell them, they wouldn't see the point of it. They have no idea what a Sangha is for. And as a result, in my opinion of course, they have gone extremely far away from what I regard as Buddhism, which is typified, of course, by the tradition that you follow. Well, what to say?

Has Ajahn Brahm told you that he and I are going to debate the role of the Sangha in Hong Kong in March?

B: Yes.

G: I suggested the topic, because it interests me. This would take us very, very far afield. I mean, I don't know whether he expects me to have a yes or no answer. I don't. On the contrary, I rather incline to think that we do need a Sangha, that the Sangha has a role, but I think it has to be rethought somewhat. One of the main functions of the Sangha originally was simply to preserve the teachings, but since we've got writing and printing and then the internet and so on, well the teachings are there. So you don't have to spend the first twenty-five years of being a monk simply sitting and reciting the texts to learn them perfectly by heart. That's no longer necessary.

On the other hand … and of course I do appreciate that if one becomes a monk, a Theravadin monk, it's likely to be also because one wants a good deal of time to oneself; one doesn't want to be too mixed up in the daily hurly burly of society and so on, and one wants to work towards one's own salvation. But I think that, really, there's a huge job to be done out there. And we don't have even one percent of the necessary people to do it. It would be much better in a way if it was like, how should I say, a European country in the middle ages, when there was a priest running a school and so on and so forth. Because, where is the moral education going to come from? There is so much moral relativism about. And also the Buddha's ideas are so intelligent.

It's true that you can't teach morality as a subject like mathematics – it doesn't have the same kind of structure – nor is it like one of the natural sciences. But that doesn't mean you have to say there are no rules, or you give up and go into mysticism, which is of course largely what the Mahayana has done. It's become very mystical – it's preserved some of the ideals like great compassion and so on, but it can't remember how they fit in. It's lost the thread so to speak. Hence this absurdity in the American kind of Buddhism I was just referring to. They set about investigating compassion, but for them, you should do compassion because it's good for you.

I went to this talk in Vienna by a rather famous monk. I won't mention his name, but I know him slightly. He's a very nice person; he's a Mahayanist. I really like him as a person, but I was absolutely HORRIFIED. I had to leave the room! He gave a lecture on ethics without even mentioning that there could be an object of your good intentions. That an ethical person might DO something good FOR somebody, it wasn't mentioned. It was all about, you know, if you manage to reach 73% on compassion or something, you'll feel better. It's not about you feeling better, it's about making somebody else feel better! That's what compassion is! Isn't that absolutely horrendous?

You only have to think for a moment about what's going on in the world, and you will see we have much need of compassion in this world, and we have much need of people going out there and trying to help other people. It's an absolutely vacuous approach to ethics, which is carried on as if it's just something you meditate on.

I did once give a class on Buddhaghosa's chapter 9 [Ed.: in the Visuddhimagga, The Path of Purification] about the four brahmavihāras in the presence of a very fine French academic, not a Buddhologist but an Indologist, and a very, very sweet man. After the first class he turned to me and said, "Richard, is there any ethics here?" Because, of course, Buddhaghosa's chapter 9 is also entirely about you. But of course if you read on a bit, it does talk about how to be nice to other monks in your monastery and so on. But it's written in a context, isn't it? It's a book written by a monk, for monks, who will be living amongst other monks. It tells you how to live in a monastery as a good monk. I don't think it would have crossed Buddhaghosa's mind that would be a serious criticism of his book, because he would've said, "Of course, you have to be nice to your wife and children, shouldn't that go without saying?" But for some people it doesn't. People have to be reminded of the basics.

I don't know if you've ever come across him, but there was this famous professor of Sanskrit, first in London, then at Cambridge, called John Brough, who did some work on the Chinese recensions of Buddhist scriptures and so on. He did the Gandhārī Dharmapada, and – I've never forgotten it, I was so shocked by it – he said that the content of the Dharmapada is terribly trite, nothing but a series of banalities. Well yes, and perhaps not. He was not a very nice man, as is rather well known. And shouldn't he have taken some of these banalities a little more seriously?

I think that the situation of Theravada Buddhism in the world is particularly disastrous. In the Far East, at least there are a lot of Mahayanist monks and, as you know, they belong to different currents and so on and so forth. Their great problem really is that in Mahayana they believe in collective karma. So they've lost one of the crucial … we haven't covered even all the most basic points about karma yet in our conversation.

S: That's an interesting point that comes up often, doesn't it?

G: Well, you know that that's wrong. Each person is the heir of their own karma. This will perhaps startle you a little, but you rightly talk about the historical context, and in that context, karma is what individuates you.

According to Brahmanism what you've got to understand is that your real self is the same as the world self, and that applies to you, and you, and me, and all of us. Therefore all our real selves are the same; we are not individuated. We aren't individuals at all, if we understand things properly. But the Buddha's doctrine of karma – of course, that would've been true of the Jaina doctrine of karma as well – individuates us. We are the heirs of our own karma: your karma is not my karma. And therefore I am WHOLLY responsible. And that means GROW UP, basically, doesn't it? Everything in you is ultimately your fault.

The Buddha doesn't deny you can have good luck and bad luck, particularly with disease, and he doesn't say that everything is due to your karma. If you get a horrible infection, it's not your fault, and it's bad luck. But you're still responsible for how you react to it. So karma is the first real philosophical basis for saying that we are individuals, that we are not the same. Each of us is responsible for his own destiny. And of course the Buddha takes that to an extraordinary length by saying it happens throughout eternity, so to speak.

So karma individuates us, and it manages to individuate us without inequality, because we are all on the same playing field. It's true that some of us have messed up badly and some of us not so badly, so that at any given moment in time some of us are doing better: we have more puññā, merit, and we're closer to Nirvana than others and so on. But everybody really started out with the same potential, and we're responsible for what we have made, and are continuing to make, of our potential. Therefore it's the first … it's very noble and excellent to say all humans are equal. But the Buddha actually provided a reason for saying that, which is very interesting. Not a reason that's been taken up by many other philosophies. He's also wonderfully rational even though obviously he can't solve every philosophical problem and doesn't, but you know he has a wonderful shot at it.

S: Yeah! Again, there's so many things in there. Actually, I just remembered a minute ago, Richard, about something I was going to comment on before. You brought up the topic of the nun's ordination and the use of karma there. I'm thinking that perhaps the way we were talking about that might not have been entirely clear to people who're not familiar with it. In Buddhism, as well as a more familiar notion of karma as ethical action, which is mainly what we're talking about, the same word karma is also used for the acts of the Sangha, the formal procedures of the Sangha.

G: Exactly.

S: And in that sense it is kind of inheriting the Brahmanical usage, and kind of adopting the forms of those Brahmanical usages, but without the metaphysical overtones. As you say, in a way its use is very bureaucratic. It always kind of strikes me that in the ordination procedure it's all about things like, "Is this a suitable candidate?" "Is there going to be somebody to look after this person?" "Are they going to have robes and bowls?" It's all very practical. "Is there a mentor?" "Does everybody know who this person is?" "What's their name?" It's a very kind of sensible list of checks and criteria that you need to ensure are fulfilled before you adopt somebody into a community.

You mentioned that with the bhikkhunīs you have this kind of mystical idea that there's some unbroken kind of lineage and so on. These are all ideas which are actually not found within the description of the bhikkhunī ordination at all. It's basically all about making sure she's a good candidate and she'll be looked after and so on.

One of the things that I've noticed … I had this kind of insight once when I was in Singapore. I was giving a talk in this monastery. I was at one end of the hall, and I was giving this Dhamma talk about meditation and so on. At the other end of the hall was this monk who was doing these rituals for people. And there was this line of rituals. People would come up, they would bow to the monk, he would do some chanting, sprinkle some holy water, give them an amulet or something, and they would give him some money in return. You could see that this was just a purely physical exchange – to come back to this physical idea of karma. It doesn't require any commitment or ethics or understanding of Dhamma, or anything like that. And I was sitting at the other end trying to explain about meditation and so on to people. Now you really realise why it is that these things are so attractive. It's so easy to do a ritual and to say, "Well, now I'm purified." I can

understand why it's tempting for people.

G: Well, that's also why the Buddha sometimes says that the most important quality is appamāda, which means diligence. And the Buddha never claimed it was easy. It's hard work. Above all, it's unremitting work. You've got to keep at it.

S: We've talked a little bit about the precursors to the idea of karma. And we've talked a little bit about how this happens in the present day. Something that I haven't really seen – maybe you don't have anything to say about this – is an explanation of how these things change. What's the actual process? For example, I've just been translating the Theragāthā, and in there you have one verse – I can't remember the name of the monk now. But every verse in the Theragāthā is like, "Here I am, sitting in seclusion, meditating and practising mindfulness and doing jhānas; I'm so happy being here." And then you have one verse that says, "In the time of the Buddha, countless aeons ago, I offered one flower, and then I rejoiced in heaven for 30,000 lives, and with what's left over I'll attain Nibbāna in this life."

And it's not just a different take on karma; it's almost like a completely different religion. And that language is almost universal in just the later strata, the Apadānas and the later strata of the Pali Canon. It's completely replaced those earlier ideas of seclusion and meditation.

G: It makes the Apadāna horrendously boring.

Well, that's another form of the degeneration, of course. It's when you start banking your puññā, on the analogy of money, and you have much more faith in the stability of banks than we do in 2014. And then you think, "Yeah, alright, I can do something now, and then I'll be able to cash in on it in a hundred thousand years time." It's very sort of puerile isn't it?

S: How did that happen?

G: Lets' talk about your question, about karma changing. I think there are two important dimensions to this. One is that, of course, the Buddha is preaching that you're responsible for your own life, and ultimately, if you try hard – maybe not in this life, but with any luck even in this life – you can turn your life around and make a really good thing of it and be so happy and peaceful and so on. And as I've written, I think it's a very optimistic view.

Most people through most of history have not lived in societies where they have had sufficient freedom of action. Mostly they are – not in name perhaps, but de facto – slaves to their circumstances. They have to work for masters, in agriculture or in industry or whatever, who make them work terribly, terribly hard, and drive them into the ground. They go home and they drive their wives into the ground. Everybody is on a treadmill. They don't have any time to think, and they certainly don't have any time to have nice discussions, like we're having. Human life is pretty miserable and very few people have much freedom of action.

Then, of course, there's the other dimension. In modern times there's so much totalitarianism and so on. You may think you're ok. But there are so many cases of somebody walking along, thinking they're perfectly ok, and then a secret policeman comes up to them and says, "Excuse me, I saw you do so and so." Maybe you didn't even do it, but anyway you disappear. There are many societies which are really, really horrible. We've lived through several of them: we've lived through the Nazis, we've lived through Stalin, we've lived through Mao. I mean, thank God we're not in any of those societies. Now we've got the Islamic States and so on, which do these horrible things.

So for most people the conditions just aren't as good as they were for the Buddha and most people around him – although you and I, being in western democracies, which are very imperfect, on the whole don't get messed around that much. They let you lead the kind of life that you want to lead. I have a very wise daughter, and she's always saying, "You know, the news is so horrible and things are so terrible in the world. But it has one good aspect: it makes me quite glad to be a housewife in London." You know, it reminds me that most people are much worse off.

So that's one aspect of it. The other aspect is that the natural tendency – which I do mention in the book and I think is very, very important – is for people to be mainly interested in … You know, they have a piece of bad luck, and we all do – you know, the trivial ones. You get up in the morning, and you're a bit bleary, and you smash your favourite cup – you know, all sorts of things. And you want to know why this happened? And you don't just want to be told, "It's your fault; you weren't paying attention," or something. So you say, "Well, it's my bad karma." And you twist that to mean it's my bad luck. So when people say, "It's my karma," in many societies – and it goes on over most of Asia – they actually mean, "It's the result of my karma." So they're looking at it sort of backwards, as a way of explaining why things aren't going as well as they had hoped.

Instead, one should look at it "forward". Karma is meant to be a lesson, a sort of exhortation: "If you put some effort into it, you will do better." And I think it's always wonderful, and very little noticed, how the Buddha doesn't talk about repentance: "You got it wrong, forget it, do better next time!" You know, that's very difficult, especially the way we're brought up in the West. Your parents tend to say, "Ooh, you naughty boy, you did this," etc., etc., and you're brought up with a lot of guilt. Guilt is a very unhelpful emotion. But people in some societies have much less of it. In Sri Lanka they didn't seem to me to have very much guilt at all. They could have perhaps done well with a little more of it! But that's the thing. So if you look at karma sort of backwards, which after all is legitimate – why shouldn't you – then you say, "Oh well, wretched me, I will never be able to do any better because I was born into a poor family or I was born rather stupid," or whatever. And that, of course, is not the way you're meant to take it.

B: I think it's interesting what you say about this. These are things I've been talking with Bhante Sujato about: this idea that there is a psychological need to use the idea of karma to kind of satisfy your sense that there is some kind of justice or something. For that reason karma becomes much more deterministic, and everything becomes karma. There is a need to find some sort of meaning in the universe, and therefore there's a psychological tendency for human beings to move in that direction. And then things become very rigid and very structured, every action leading to a specific result.

The second thing, which I think is interesting here, is that you find this idea in the later Buddhist literature: the Apadāna, as you say, the Jātakas, the Vimānavatthu and the Petavatthu. Again, here there's a very strong sense of determinism in regard to karma. You do one act, and it has one specific result. One of the things I take away from this – and maybe you can comment on this – is that the problem in Buddhism, perhaps, is that we focus too much on the later literature. People read the later literature, the stories in the Vimānavatthu and the Petavatthu,

because it's entertaining, because it's good fun, and they take away the wrong message. So what we really need to do in Buddhism is to go back to the early Buddhist texts, back to the Nikāyas, back to the word of the Buddha.

G: Absolutely. The Jātakas are terrific, but as you say they're not always the right message.

But absolutely, yes. Of course, nowadays, it's not a tradition, but I think reading the Vinaya is also quite instructive, because of the practicality and good sense that goes through the Vinaya. It also tells you an awful lot about Buddhist society, which you don't get from any other source. I wish I'd read more of the Vinaya myself. I've never had the time.

But yes, I mean basically, above all, it's the suttas, isn't it? With just a small amount of other stuff, such as the Sutta Nipāta and then the Dhammapada, but not very much beyond the suttas. But there're plenty of those actually. Who's ever read the whole Aṅguttara Nikāya? Oh, I couldn't agree more. Hear! Hear! Yes.

S: You were talking about the role that karma plays in Buddhist society, and I think that some times in this talk, and in previous talks, we've come down a little bit hard on the secular Buddhists – sometimes for wanting to throw the idea of karma out altogether – but there's also another side to that. In the Guardian some time ago there was an article by one of the members of the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order, Vishvapani. He wrote an article about the superstitions that Buddhism needs to get rid of, and number one on the list was karma.

G: Was it clear what he meant?

S: Yeah, he meant the whole thing of karma and rebirth and all of that stuff needs to be thrown out.

G: The whole lot?

S: The whole lot, yes, lock, stock and barrel.

I think one of the things with the secularist ideas is that sometimes they're responding to notions of karma which are found within the traditional societies, which are themselves very problematic, rather than kind of discerning what the Buddha taught as karma and what we've been talking about as ethical teachings. I think this also parallels with what happened in India with Ambedkar [Ed.: B.R. Ambedkar, a noted low caste Indian social reformer, who converted to Buddhism]. As far as I know – and you probably know this better than I do – he concluded that the notion of karma was a kind of Hindu influence, and he sort of got rid of that completely from his formulation of Buddhism, which is incredibly influential in modern Indian Buddhism.

But to come more to your experience with anthropological studies in Sri Lanka. I had one student here in Australia who's doing a study on the way the doctrine of karma impacts the treatment disabled people. Just as one example, there's a tendency to say, "Well, it's your karma, therefore we can't do anything." What's been your experience with this? Do you think karma is a positive ethical force? What are some of the different ways you've seen this framed in your experience in Sri Lanka?

G: I'm afraid I can only agree with you: I don't think it's very positive. There is this tendency when you look at something which is wrong – with you or people you like or whatever – and then you say, "Oh well, there it is, it can't be helped; it's because of things in a former life." You don't say, "Well, this is where we are, and we have to start from here; let's get going." People tend not to do that at all. And yes, that's something about the whole society there, isn't it? There's more passivity, and that's probably also to do with political traditions – to what extent people were allowed to, you know, plough their own furrow and so on. That's undeniably true.

I mean, you find some very good and sympathetic people and so on in Buddhist societies and Buddhism, but there's a particular sort of type in Christianity, which I've always admired very much, and I don't find very much in Buddhism. That's a typical sort of middle aged lady, perhaps a housewife, probably a mother, who's a nurse or carer or something like that and has to sort of devote most of her life – whether paid for it or not, and sometimes a mixture – looking after other people, and yet always manages to be cheerful. It's a very fine tradition. I don't know where it comes from exactly in Christianity, but cheerfulness is a virtue. These women who are working all day long in very boring routine tasks, helping people go to the toilet and cooking them boring meals and so on, yet always manage to be cheerful and kind and so on. There is definitely a type in Christian society. These are working class or lower middle class women. And they are people who don't ever think, "How did I ever get into this mess." That doesn't cross their minds. They just think, "This is what I've got to do; I've got to make granny comfortable now, I've got to look after the baby, I've got to do this," and they derive satisfaction from doing their job properly.

Maybe this is quite a subjective anecdotal and false impression, and I don't know why this strikes me as peculiar to a Christian society. Not that I am saying that these people are necessarily religious Christians, but it's something they imbibe from Christianity. I had a very nice schoolmaster. I never found out, actually, whether he really believed in Christianity himself, though I do know that his father was a clergyman, so he may have believed in it. But he was very much this sort of person, always saying we must be cheerful. And I felt he was morally very wholesome, so to speak.

S: Perhaps it's a British thing. Keep calm and carry on.

G: That's right. The British are sometimes sort of culpably undemonstrative, of course. I mean, I think it often happens in British relationships that somebody says after 25 years, "Good heavens, I never realised that you really liked me."

S: I am just looking at some of the questions we haven't asked yet. We mentioned this issue with the secularist critique of karma and so on. It's based on an unexamined kind of assumption that of course the materialist world view is the right one, and anybody who's really got more than two or three brain cells wired together in the right way knows this, if they're not pretending otherwise. Once you assume that's the case, the teaching on karma and rebirth must be wrong. And therefore we have to dismiss any kind of ideas about them.

One of the things that always strikes us is that this is, in a sense, a kind of overreach of the methods of science. I know from some of our previous discussions that you've been influenced by the philosophy of Karl Popper [Ed.: Karl Raimund Popper, noted Austrian-British philosopher and professor at the London School of Economics] and his work on the philosophy of science.

G: Very much.

S: Do you have any comments about that in terms of the purpose and limits of scientific research within a topic like Buddhism?

G: Well, this is my nightmare. My Buddhist ahiṁsa (harmlessness) takes wing at this point. I would like to burn them all in boiling oil. I mean, this thing about Buddhism and science. You know, what can be stupider, in my opinion, than measuring mettā or something like that? As I say, they have no understanding whatsoever of what ethics is. Look, I have actually written about this, but what I write is too polemical, I don't publish it.

They don't understand either Buddhism or science, at all. The whole point about science, which is very wonderful, is that it makes progress by saying: "This is what we think today, and this is why we think it; test it out" – as the Buddha, of course, also said – and then, "See if you can do better; let's make progress."

And the history of the world shows that, especially in fairly recent times, but for quite a long time now, this has worked. We live in a totally different world because scientists are always prepared to say, "No, I was wrong! I'm going on to the next stage now. I've understood what you say, and there's a lot in it." And that's why scientists are often quite pleasant company, because they're not so pompous as to think they have all the answers. The whole point about science, in other words, is that it has not reached the end of discovering truth. And the whole point about Buddhism, you see, is that it claims to be eternal, that it has found certain eternal truths.

Now, I don't agree with everything the Buddha said. But one of the main things about this book (What the Buddha Thought) really, perhaps the main thing, is that I want to show that all the main teachings of the Buddha hang together. You can't pick and choose like Stephen Batchelor, or some of these modern scientists and so on. You know a lot of this has come up in what we've been talking about, karma.

I don't believe in rebirth in a crude way, in the sense that if I meditate hard enough I will remember what I was and did in my previous life or the life before that and so on. I think there is a very useful meaning for the doctrine of rebirth, which T. W. Rhys Davids [Ed.: Thomas William Rhys Davids, 1843-1922, scholar of the Pali language and founder of the Pali Text Society] talked about in one of those books he published about his lectures in the 1880s and possibly 1890s. He says that there is such a thing as your deeds surviving you and so on, because we all have the potential to contribute to human understanding, to human welfare and so on. If we have good ideas, good arguments, do kind acts, etc., we are contributing to the good of the world. I don't think he included animals in that, but I don't see why one shouldn't actually include animals as well. So the things that we do can be made to live after us, and there is some sense in which our karma is reborn, but not quite the sense in which the Buddha said.

At the same time, I think one of the most important things that people must be reminded of is that we're all infinitely ignorant, and above all we don't yet have a clue what consciousness is. We simply don't know. And therefore to pontificate on the basis of measuring electrical currents in the brain – as if that could tell us anything – is absolute foolishness. It seems to be just damn stupid. Yes, neurology is fascinating: it's very interesting to know that all the words for kinds of tools, for example, are stored in a particular place that you can locate in my brain, and the German or French or English ones are all stored in the same place. That's very surprising and quite fun to know. But what has that got to do with Buddhism and the essential things of life? Absolutely zero! Nothing! These people are wasting their time, and I do get rather peeved because I'm always trying to collect a few pence to keep my OCBS [Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies] going, and these people get millions of dollars for doing just rubbish. And I don't get a penny for doing serious work!

S: This is completely besides the point, but you just mentioned your centre. Maybe you could say a few words about what you're doing there with the Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies?

G: Well, when I retired from Oxford University in 2004, it was a rather peculiar situation. I had entered Oxford University as an undergraduate in 1957 and there was no tuition in any form of Buddhism whatsoever available in Oxford University. When I then said that I wanted to study Sanskrit and Pali – I was particularly interested in Pali – I was allowed to sort of teach myself for a little bit and take one paper in Buddhism in my finals. Gradually I worked my way up and became Professor of Sanskrit, but I was allowed to teach Pali as well, for about a quarter of the time, and I did that. Of course, I had to work under various constraints. I now teach Pali far, far better than I used to, because I don't work under university rules of how it has to be done, which is two hours a week, which is not a good way of learning a language. Gradually I had more and more people. I had, by the end, supervised 50 higher degrees, a few of them were Masters Degrees, but most were Doctorates. That was probably about 75% of all the higher degrees in Buddhism in the British Isles.

Then came the time for my mandatory retirement, aged 67, and it looked as if there would again be no teaching of Pali available, or indeed of Buddhism. I had colleagues in Chinese, but they happened not to be interested in Buddhism – same with Japanese. There wasn't yet very much Tibetan. You know, the whole thing would disappear again.

So I founded this Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies. I called together a lot of ex-pupils and other people I thought might be interested, some from the Buddhist Society in London, and everybody said what a good idea it was. And so I founded it with my own money. I thought it would cost very little, and it jolly well had to cost very little, because I don't have very much money. So we started off, and we do various things, all of which are available on the website to see. And it's been a very, very uncomfortable ride, indeed. I've been tolerated [by] the university, but there's no enthusiasm, to put it mildly, for what I'm doing.

The Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies is registered with the government as an educational charity. It's not a religious charity, something I approve of, because I want to teach Buddhism academically. There is already – and I was a member of it myself when I was a student – a Oxford University Buddhist Society for students and anybody who wants to turn up, and they sit on cushions and do some meditation. But that's not really what the university is for. We don't need that, and anyway it's there already. But we do need to know a great deal more about Buddhism and teach other people about it, especially knowledge which is at a level where it needs and uses Buddhist languages.

So I started that, and after a while I also started a lecture series of about 20 lectures a year in the University on all sorts of different forms of Buddhism. I've always been very insistent that if Buddhism is studied through any discipline, then any Buddhist tradition is studied. If anything calls itself Buddhist, I don't want to quibble about boundaries.

And then we have the Journal, which comes out twice a year. I'm glad to say it's a great success: it got a wonderful review in Tricycle [Ed.: Tricycle: The Buddhist Review is an independent, non-sectarian Buddhist quarterly magazine established in 1991]. The principle there, again, is to be open to any kind of contribution on Buddhism which contributes to our knowledge or understanding of any form of Buddhism. And it must do so in a way that is intelligible to anybody interested in Buddhism. So if you write an article on Chinese Buddhism, you're not allowed to use Chinese words without translating them. That's the editorial policy because I always get very frustrated with say the Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies because, you know, I can't understand two thirds of the articles. I don't know Chinese or Tibetan.

But it's very hard work, because I have to do it all myself. I'm the editor, except I have a very nice volunteer, an ex-pupil, who does all the formatting and puts it into its final electronic form for nothing. There is no labour cost on the Journal; it's done entirely by voluntary labour. Zero. It has to be that way, because there's no money. The trouble is that we can't avoid the fact that we have to pay rent. And I have just two employees, each of whom is a lovely, lovely person. They are not Buddhists, but amiable towards Buddhism. They work 18 hours a week each, nominally; in fact they put in a lot of extra time. And they're paid at such a low rate that I would blush to tell you what it is. They do it for love, really. And we're very dependent on them. One is a lady who is a bookkeeper – that's very important. So we're very, very careful with money. It's pennies – this is not a metaphor – rather than pounds. And on we go, almost always without knowing whether we'll be open in a year's time. We don't know whether we'll be able to pay the rent say nine months from now or whatever. And I find that stressful.

I'm 77, and I'd be perfectly happy to give up the reins, but nobody else would do the job for free, will they? I do it for nothing. In fact, what I earn by teaching or lecturing I give to the Centre. So it's not sure whether there is going to be a successor. I'm not sure how long I can go on doing it, what with being the editor of the Journal at the same time; that's a pretty heavy load. And I'm continually engaged in various sorts of wild goose chases for money, which usually end in not getting a single penny.

Of course, whenever I go to a conference anywhere, I have to pay my own fare, because nobody is going to pay for me.

B: Except, Richard, we will pay for you if you come to our conference in Perth, you know. We will pay for you all the way down with a nice Business Class ticket and everything.

G: Fortunately, my wife, rather sensibly, is against that. Firstly, I have to travel upper class, because, I won't go into it, but I have something seriously wrong with my left leg, which is irremediable. And so I need a lot of space to sit and so on.

And, you see, you're in August, and I always give my international intensive Pali class in August. I gave it again this year. It wears me out, but I enjoy it enormously. It's wonderful. As far as I can see, it's the only way that we're going to get any more Pali scholars in the world. And a couple of people I've had on that course have gone on and studied by themselves – not at university – and produced some wonderful stuff.

You may have seen things by Brett Schultz, for example. Brett has a B.A. in Business Studies from Oklahoma. He was in the American navy for a little while. He then wandered around the world and picked up some IT. He ended up in Hong Kong looking after the IT of a bank. And for some reason, which I've never fathomed – I don't think he has either – he decided one year for his summer holiday to come on my Pali course. When he arrived, I was really very surprised by the kind of person he was. He certainly behaved very untypically. He had a very neat notebook. Virtually every single word I said he wrote down in a very neat handwriting, and at the end of the day he asked me to check that he'd written everything correctly, which is wonderful. That's appamāda for you! And he's taught himself Sanskrit to read the Upanishads. He's producing marvellous stuff. He's not the only one, although he's the outstanding example.

B: How many students did you have this year, Richard?

G: Well, the answer is that I always take 14. I turn down anybody else. This year I had 12, because on the very day before the course began two people withdrew. One had a sudden bereavement in the family, and one fell ill.

I can't handle more than 14, really, because I give people individual attention. I teach six hours a day for twelve days, and that's a lot. But I love it, because people are really interested, really very keen. They come from all over the world. I've had people from Australia. I mean, almost every country in the world, but not Africa yet.

B: Well, Richard, let me just say one more time that we would love to have you come down for the conference – if there's any opportunity whatsoever, if there's any reconsideration, if your wife change her mind, or whatever.

G: It's in August isn't it?

B: It's August 8th and 9th, so it's in the first half of August. There might even be – I can't really decide this on my own – but I've been told that for the people who come there's an honorarium. So there might be some money that can go towards the Oxford Centre. How is that for an enticement? So please think about it.

G: I've already been slightly inveigled to this trip to Hong Kong in March. There's this old Jewish joke you know, "Who's going to look after the shop?" As I'm the only person running the OCBS, I can't be away too much.

Anyway, thank you very much, and I am really very sorry. If you had it in a different month, it would be a slightly different matter, but coming back then and having to plunge into my tremendously taxing teaching schedule is rather difficult.

I mean, this year wasn't very good in that respect, because in the first half of the month there was the International Association of Buddhist Studies conference in Vienna. It's held only once every three years, and I think it more or less belongs to my position that I should go and attend it. And I did attend it, and I'm glad I did. It was worth attending, if only to confirm my gloomiest thoughts about the collapse of Theravada in the world. There were no papers on Theravada – 420 papers and nothing on Theravada.

S: 420 papers and nothing on Theravada? Is that what you just said?

G: Yes.

S: I thought that's what you said; I just had to make myself believe it. I went to a Buddhist conference a few years ago: two days of papers, twenty minutes each, and in those two days there was only one paper that talked about anything at all that happened in the first 500 years of Buddhism. And that was my essay!

G: I'm sorry, but that's absolutely typical. You probably haven't read the editorial I wrote for the first number of our journal, but I talked about the previous IABS Conference in Taiwan where there were – I counted them – exactly 500 papers given. And again, there was no paper about the Buddha. There was one paper about, sort of, the attitude in the Tripitaka to other religions. One, and that was it. A few of us got together and said, "You know, the Buddha is like the elephant in the room." I mean, the Buddha wasn't mentioned. It's not just Theravada, but the Buddha isn't mentioned either.

S: Nothing: not Ashoka, not the origins of the schools, not the Canon, not the development of the Abhidhamma. Nothing in the first 500 year period. I mean, you can imagine going to a conference on Christianity and nobody talking about Jesus or the Gospels or the Bible or anything that happened in the first 500 years of Christianity? I find it just astonishing.

G: I have made the same analogy myself, in the same tone of voice.

S: Good.

G: That's what I want to talk about when I discuss the role of the Sangha [in Hong Kong with Ajahn Brahm]. I mean, the Sangha had better get its act together and, you know, get people talking about these things. Is it that Theravada is so unpopular because they won't ordain women? Why is it?

The problem is also the Thais. That's one country, of course, where they're not badly off economically. And there's a very big Sangha, but they're also horrendously nationalistic. They don't believe that anybody else can tell them anything about Buddhism. Despite that, I had a Thai monk in my class this year, and I've had a couple of Thais before this. There's the odd individual. They're not people of power or influence of course. But they're very ...

B: They might be one day, though. You never know.

G: I hope so, if I can carry on. I have people each year who say I have a friend who'd like to come next year, and I say, "Well, let's hope. I'm not sure I'll be here next year."

S: Professor, I think we've kept you for a long time already, so we probably should be wrapping up, I think.

G: I've kept you from bed actually, haven't I?

B: Not at all, it's only quarter to eight here.

S: When this is finished, we go back down to Serpentine. Thank you so much. It's been fantastic to meet you and talk with you, if only virtually.

G: The talk is not virtual, the talk is quite real.

S: I guess from a Buddhist point of view it's no more virtual than meeting you any other way. So that's good. But, yeah, thank you so much for that. And we hope to see you sometime in Australia?

B: Yes, thank you very much Professor. It's most appreciated from our side that you took this time for us.

S: One thing I just wanted to say is to thank you for your work. I've kind of existed, I guess, on the periphery of universities. I kind of associate with Buddhist scholars and things like that, but I am not working at a university.

But one of the things I have kind of noticed is that a lot of the humanities seem to be very much in thrall to science – you know, not just in Buddhism, but also in places like psychology and so on. They're sort of trying to be scientific. And I think in your work, you haven't been afraid to be a humanist: you're talking Buddhism, not just as an abstract entity, but as something that has an actual meaning for lives – whether it's in the context of people in the time of the Buddha or in contemporary work. And to me, one of the distinguishing features of your work is that it's been very much about Buddhism as a humanism and how this relates to people and affects their lives. So I just wanted to say thank you for doing that work.

G: Well, thank you very much. You've reminded me of a pupil I once had, who was a theology student, and he had to do an essay on Buddhism. His first words were, "The Buddha was a great humanist". And I said, "This essay is brilliant." I thought he got the point in one sentence.

But I also want to thank both of you for the splendid thing on the authenticity. I'm still waiting for replies on that. I hope there will be some. Have you had any replies?

S: People's comments and things? We've had one or two.

B: Venerable Bhikkhu Bodhi replied to us, and he said he was very happy with that work. But that would be expected for somebody like him I suppose.

G: I mean, have you had any criticisms?

S: Not that we've seen. We've had a few very positive responses. So we'll wait and see perhaps.

G: Ah, well, I'm of course being a Popperian – still waiting for criticisms.

B: Of course.

G: It's a fine piece of work. Thank you.

S: Thank you.

B: Thank you Richard. Thank you so much.

G: Ok, we'll meet again. Bye bye.

B: Bye bye.

S: Bye bye.

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