

TENZIN PALMO
INTERVIEW 5
(08/12/2021)

Introduction by Dr Lwiis Saliba

In the presence of Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo

Jetsunma's presence among us is not only for answering questions, but is in itself a blessing, especially in this region of the world, namely the Arab countries, about which she herself said that the Dharma was almost absent. Despite this, we and others are working hard and with the gracious help of Jetsunma, to make the Dharma present. The fruits of our labor began to appear, and the candle of light, when lit, would not be able to be extinguished by all the surrounding darkness.

I will quickly and briefly tell two stories about our work. Last June, a Faculty of Sharia (Muslim law) at some university in Iraq asked me to deliver a lecture on religious sciences via zoom. Still, when I suggested that the topic would be on Buddhism, they totally refused, on the grounds that it was a sensitive topic.

Today, on November 16, we opened at the Dominican International University, a master's department for the study of religious sciences, taught in Arabic, in which Buddhism will be explained for students in all the Arab world through a dense academic program. I will personally teach this topic. I was chosen to deliver the opening speech there, which was attended by a group of students as well as the Christian and Muslim clergy. I quoted Jetsunma in this opening speech, which is by now available on YouTube:

"My revered and wise teacher Tenzin Palmo, the nun and founder of one of the major convents for Tibetan nuns in India, recounts that she attended an interfaith conference in Jerusalem with some of her Buddhist nuns. Since the garb of Buddhist nuns, with their red clothes and their shaved heads, was not familiar to the inhabitants of the Holy City, be they Muslims, Christians, Arabs and Jews, some residents, devotees of these different religions, came to enquire from her and her nuns: "From which religion are you?" She replied that I am a Buddhist. They said to her: "what is Buddhism? Is it a new religion? We hadn't heard of it before!" She answered: "Quite the opposite. Buddhism is one of the oldest religions, its age is more than 2500 years". And then, they asked her the question that was perplexing for them, it was actually turning around in their minds: "So, this Buddhism, against which religion is it?" How surprised they were by her answer when she told them: "Buddhism is not against any other religion, and it constantly seeks peace and harmony among all religions". They said to her: "This Buddhist religion is strange, and we would like to know more about it. We have never before heard of a religion that is not the least against another religion". This anecdote, concerning a dialogue which really happened, is nothing but an expressive picture of the "lofty mentality" that we have inherited, and we are still a victim of it. Our religious affiliation is often in opposition to and against the affiliations of the other ones.

Today, I am pleased to announce with confidence that we inaugurate this MA in Religious Studies and Comparative Religions at the Arab Department of the University. We light a candle, as an exit from a dark tunnel. No matter how dark the darkness is, it will not be able to

extinguish the light of the candle. It represents the candle of knowledge that is destined to be spread. A famous Arab proverb runs as follows: "It is better for a person to light a candle of knowledge than to curse the darkness". This is what I invite you to remember and apply"! The attendees, Christian and Muslim clergymen as well as students, listened politely and carefully to Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo's words which I transmitted to them.

Yes, Buddhism has a word to say, and a message of peace and love conveyed in this region of the world that is still floundering in a sea of darkness.

Lwiis : Tenzin Palmo, welcome to our fifth interview. Before starting our questions do you have some short observations to share with us?

Tenzin Palmo: Well, I'm very grateful to you for all the effort you are making to create more harmony and more understanding between all the various religions of the world. These religions should be the ones to show us how to bring out basic goodness. Why are they not doing that? Indeed, all the religions tell us that we must be good, we must be kind, we must help others, that all being wish happiness, they don't wish to suffer, that I'd rather be happy than miserable, you'd rather be happy than miserable, everybody would rather be happy than miserable. So, why are we creating misery for people, when we know that they'd rather be happy?

In this sense, we should just keep to the basics of whatever is our religious faith and remember that it's always based on love and kindness, on helping others, being kind to our neighbors, not hurting them and wanting for others what we want for ourselves. How is it that they have so much missed this message? Everybody knows this, so why are we not doing it? Truly, we could do that much!

That's the question: religions should be leading people in the right direction and not creating, being the cause of more problems. In fact, they should be the one saving from the world problems, they should stand up for what their founders taught them and bring it into reality. If religion don't tell us the truth, from whoever will we learn it? I sometimes think that, if Jesus, Buddha or Mohammed were all right there looking down, they would be wondering where religion has gone from what they were trying to tell people? Indeed, honestly their message was so clear, so how is it we have misunderstood it, and we have gone so far astray. Really, everybody should learn how to live according to these messages, with respect to each other, in harmony, just as human beings. We think we could manage that much, so yes, come on! Listen to what your founders told you and bring that into reality!

Lwiis : This anecdote was very significant for students as well as clergymen. They were listening carefully because, in fact, we are too often educated in our religion to be against another one. That's why I am telling Buddhism has something to say in this region of the world, and they have some message of love, message of accepting others. This very message should be increasingly developed.

TP : Of course, I find it's very sad , that religious leaders, who should be the ones that really show us the light, are often the ones who are actually waving the sword and the guns. That is not how it should be. They should bring out our innate goodness, that's what they should be teaching people, about genuine inner goodness, our good nature. Basic nature is good, why are they not helping by an example for others to follow, by the right example?

Lwiis : That's why we all want you to be with us, because it's a new and small sangha, but, should you leading this sangha, it will have more encouragement to go on amidst this really dark people and dark period as well ...

TP : Nowadays, that's a lot out there, I mean, on the Internet , you find many, many teachers; many good things happening , many instructions on how to live a meaningful life. So, in that way, we should acknowledge this pandemic has been quite extraordinary, because it got all the teachers coming online, who would previously never have done so. Thanks to that, there is an enormous wealth of spiritual teachings now, that people can easily download. As we are saying, so much is on YouTube and in podcast... It's there, now!

Lwiis : I know it is very well now , but with you , your attention is a real blessing, that's all what I wanted to say!

TP (laughing): Ok!

Lwiis : Let's start our questions : You said about your long retreat in the cave, "one thing I can tell you is that I was never bored" page 198. My question is: "What can we do to push away the boredom we are victims of, in our daily life as well as in our spiritual quest?"

TP : One way to clear up boredom, I think, is to pay attention. So often, we do things mindlessly again and again. We just have some habits, without giving them any attention, so when we begin to work, we find it boring. But, if we bring more mindfulness even into a very simple task, which normally we thought very boring, if we give full attention to what we are doing, it just ceases to be boring. Actually, it becomes very interesting.

Another way to work is the following: If you are bored, then, I would say, just relax into that boredom, and watch it, observe it, what it feels like, how is it, how is the mind? Then, we begin to get interested in what's going on inside ourselves, by paying attention. Indeed, we are often just bored because we precisely get into this kind of dull state of just doing things and not being interested. However, if we pay attention, then things become much more interesting. Moreover, boredom is not by itself a bad thing, sometimes, if we are bored, so, we are bored, and we can accept it! Nonetheless, if, in our spiritual practice, we are *always* bored, maybe we need to change it for a while, to do something new and different, which capture our attention. Because it's all about being aware on what's going on, normally we are not aware and that's why we get bored.

Lwiis : Sometimes we are bored because we do and see always the same things ... So, we don't feel any real evolution, any real progress, and all this in addition to this continual agitation of mind. We just cannot go beyond it...

TP : That's why you have got to be attentive , that's why you've got to bring all your attention, all your awareness to what you are doing, to what you are thinking, otherwise we will get bored because we are not paying attention!

Lwiis : This is a major problem because attention also need some concentration, and we feel that spontaneously we lose attention....

TP : Yes, this is why we need to start training ourselves. I mean, the point of learning how to be more aware of more mindful and learning how to meditate properly is to help the mind to become more focused. We get bored because we are unfocused, doing some ordinary business

which you do every time, like a routine. Thus, pay attention to what you're doing, watch your body, watch your mind, bring yourself into the present: that won't be boring anymore!

Lwiis : Do you think that only by practice, we can progress in our skill for attention?

TP : Of course that's what is all about. As they say: "Practice makes perfect". So, if you don't practice, you won't get anywhere, but if you keep practicing, trying to bring your attention back again and again, with joy, with interest, then, the mind will learn that habit. The habit of mindlessness will become habit of mindfulness. In this way, things are not boring because every moment is new. We tend to think that every moment is the same that the previous moment, but that's not true, if we pay attention, every moment is fresh!

Lwiis: In our practice, sometimes we have a long period where we feel that attention is less, or the same and that we don't progress, that's why we may have no courage to go on, we feel that everything is same, agitation, dullness, etc...

TP : But this is not! This is where we made the mistake, it's because we are not paying attention, if we were more present in the moment, we would see every moment is new, it's not the same, it's the same only because our mind is dull, is neither clear nor sharp. Thus, the problem is not what's happening out there, the problem is what's happening in our mind.

2) Lwiis: You often broached the topic of breathing, especially the breathing of the vase, you cited it many times in your speeches, but there are different variants of it, what do you think about its main form and which variants are useful for the practice? Could this vase breathing be taken as a standard respiration in our long-term practice? Does this vase breathing correspond to the advice to push the energy toward the hara on the exhalation in Zen meditation?

TP : Vase breathing , (*khumbaka* as it's called in Sanskrit), is a method to activate the prana, the vital breath, by its retention in the abdomen. It makes it look like a vase, due to that, it is called vase breathing. Nevertheless, to tell it honestly and truly, we should be careful because if we do it wrong, we can cause a lot of problems for ourselves, mentally or physically, and so, I will not advise anyone to do it without getting instructions from a teacher on how to do it properly. If you do it wrong, you can really upset the *lung* (*skt prāna*), the energy in the body. Should it be the case, it could cause a lot of problems.

Lwiis : Should we necessarily be guided by a teacher when we practice it ?

TP: Yes, because, I repeat it, if we do it wrong it can create a lot of problems.

Lwiis: This is true! Mostly in pranayama, there are many exercises which are so delicate to practice!

TP : Quite so, this is why, traditionally, you always do that with a Guru who teaches and watches you, making sure you're doing right. Nowadays everybody's learn on Google or some other media, but it's not the same!

Lwiis : They watch teachings also mostly on YouTube, and many times, they do it without any check on them for the practice...

TP : I would say, be careful !

3) Lwiis: With the popularity of mindfulness these days, we often hear people saying they don't need to practice formal meditation, because they practice mindfulness in daily life most of the time. However, it seems that, in this way, they may well deceive themselves...What explanation would you give them to help them to find a balance between a formal practice and the practice between sessions?

TP : Basically, our practice between the sessions, consists in being mindful and depends on the depths of the formal sitting meditation. So, it's important to maintain this balance between formal sittings and daily mindfulness. Usually, a period of formal sitting without distraction leads to much deeper levels: you are not just mindful of actions but only sitting. The body is still, there is only the mind. In formal meditation you are just sitting there with a mind which has only to look to what happens inside. So that allows for deeper and deeper exploration of our consciousness, since we don't have the distractions of everyday life, movements, and dealing with events outside of ourselves. Therefore, retreat centers are quite useful, because they teach insight meditation, i.e., vipassana and calm-abiding meditation, *shamata* as well as mindfulness. They never say: "You can just go out and try to be mindful during the day, you don't need to also do formal sitting, you also don't need to do retreats..." They teach both, because one sustains the other: if you have no mindfulness in the daily life, but only when you are in retreat, when you leave retreat, everything will fall apart!

Lwiis : So, do you need to have that continuation of mindfulness?

TP : Yes. Still, mindfulness is deeper when strengthened through the formal sitting and retreat, so the two of them go together, they sustain each other.

Lwiis : We should practice both...

TP : Quite so, definitely, since one without the other will neither bring any really depth inside, nor transform the mind. The point is to change our consciousness and for that, you need study and application but also periods of just completely being one with the consciousness and without being disturbed by a too active daily life.

4) Lwiis : In a number of spiritual movement and established religions, there is a clear impression that the hierarchy and teachers are trying to infantilize the believers. It's certainly not conducing to spiritual maturity. Is it also your feeling? If so, how can we get out of this rut? And how can we distinguish between this and true spiritual childhood, which is a quality?

TP : Well, first of all : for any skill that we wish to learn, any sports or music or any skill, we need a guide, we need a teacher, because the teacher can show us where we are going wrong , and show us how to do things properly. If we just try to do it on our own, we are bound to make a lot of mistakes, and moreover, we won't know our mistakes, we won't understand. Even in the most mundane things, like learning how to play football, you need to have a teacher, to have someone to help you. Likewise, when we are on a spiritual path, to begin we are like children, we are not very mature. Buddha used to call ordinary people "the childish ones". So, at that time, we need a guide, just as a child needs the parents. However, good parents are bringing up their children to be responsible adults, while bad parents are bringing up the children to always be dependent on themselves, on "mummy daddy help", even when

those are grownup. Likewise, a good Guru teaches his students to be mature and independent. Certainly, they always have devotion for their guru, just like children always love their parents, but they don't keep running to them every moment.

I mean a guru who needs his students to always be student forever has obviously a problem. On the contrary, a genuine guru is teaching their student to become inwardly, spiritually mature and independent of their reliance on him, even though they maintain the devotion for him. In this way, the problem is not the system, but our mind. First, we should acknowledge that we need instructions, e.g., "I don't know how to meditate I need someone to help me to meditate, I need someone to point out when I am making mistakes, I need someone to encourage me". In this sense, our openness to a genuine Guru is important: this is through our openness than we get the blessings from his mind. That's one of the important things, understanding well that it comes through openness towards the teacher. Without devotion, it won't work: take sunlight, if you open up the curtains, the sun will come in, while if you close the curtains, the room will stay dark. Nonetheless, as we said, a genuine guru at a certain point expects students themselves to become teachers or even, at least they expect them to not at every moment rely on them but to have their own independence. Thus, the problem is only with bad gurus, it's not with good ones. The problem is not the Guru situation, the problem is how it's exploited by those who need to have students and receive devotion and surrender, in reality for their own psychological needs. Of course, they are not the right kind of teachers to follow.

To evaluate a guru, look at his students: after 10 or 20 years, you can see what kind of atmosphere is around them. In particular, do the students still run to the Guru every minute for their decision, or are they poised and able to make their own decision?

Lwiis : Even Swami Vijayananda says yoga is not worship of the Guru. In fact, we see a lot of worship of gurus around the world, what would you say about this phenomenon?

TP : If you have a teacher, which truly exemplifies all the qualities which yourself are trying to achieve, then of course you'll have great devotion to them, but it doesn't mean that you will blindly have it, you can also observe that although they have so many qualities, they are also human beings. Actually, the problem only comes when the worship is blind and becomes a cult, then it is very dangerous. Nonetheless, genuine teachers don't create cults. Their relationship with their students is much easier, they do not demand total surrender and blind faith. About those who do like that, I would be very suspicious.

Lwiis : What about your own relation with your guru, when you were in the cave also far from him. It was your own experience, but were you still linked with him?

TP : Yes, usually I would go every year to see him and tell him how it was getting on. In any case, it's really true that if you have devotion to the Lama or the teacher, they are there any time you need them, it's not a matter of physical distance. Your mind is open to them, their mind is open to you, so physical separation is not the point. You could be sitting in front of somebody, or you could be thousand miles away, if you have genuine openness and devotion, then you are closer to the Guru as to the beatings of your heart ...

A genuine teacher is very important. Still, my Lama himself towards the end, when I asked him: "Rinpoche, what should I do now?" he would say: "what do you want to do?" and then I would tell him what I thought I like to do, and he said "OK that's really good to do that", or else, "you really want to do that?" (Laughing) This meant that it was not such a good idea.... He expected that I, at a certain point, would be able to take the reins on my own, on what I wanted to do, what practices I was attracted to.

Lwiis : Do you still feel some link with him after his departure ?

TP: In Tibetan tradition, sages come back again, so now the ninth Khamtrul Rinpoche is there: he is 41, and is the main lama for our nunnery. He lives in the monastery which is down road from us. I have known him since he's two years old, in Tibetan system when the lamas die, they quickly find a new incarnation.

Lwiis: So, is your relationship with the new one the same than with your first Rinpoche?

TP : Not really since I met the first one on my 21st birthday. He was older than me. In this sense, he was almost like a father figure, he was not that much old, but to me it was like an authority, whereas the present one, I've known him since he was a baby! I was much older, he was just a child, my relationship with him, therefore, has been very different. He's very good Lama, no complaints about him, he's no trouble!

Lwiis: Does he deliver the same teaching than your first Rinpoche?

TP : Every incarnation is different, each one has his own personality, has qualities of the other one but also is different, so by the time I met with this new one, when he was young, I had already established my practice. Thus, I didn't need to go to him for teaching. Moreover, we had many yogis (disciples of my Guru) who were already teachers in these days. However, he is there as a spiritual guide for nuns, of course not now because it's lockdown. Still, normally, when I asked him to come teaching, he would be very happy to come.

5) Lwiis: You say about channeling our own energy "all great saints were passionate people, the crucial point is that they did not dissipate their passions in negatives ways" p23. How do we dissipate our energy in negatives ways? And how to avoid this loss?

TP : Our minds are often habituated to poisonous emotions, like greed desire, anger, aversion, jealousy, pride and especially our unknowing, our ignorance. Therefore, we normally give in to our desires and our greed, we see something we like or someone we like, we want them, even food or anything. We are very often giving in, or on the contrary something annoys us, people annoy us, a situation annoys us, so, we get angry. All that produces a lot of emotions, as well as a lot of energy which we put into very negative things: we get jealous, we get arrogant, etc. Normally, when these feelings come up, like greed or anger, we are not even aware of them, we are overtaken by these emotions, we just get swept along by them!

When our mind is working with negative emotions, they much influence us, our speech, our actions, so we say bad things, we do bad things, based on these negative emotions in the mind. Someone who is spiritually advanced does not dissipate the energy with these negative emotions, but changes them. For example, desire and greed becomes devotion, anger becomes clarity of mind, lust is transformed into compassion. We work with these negative emotions, we recognize them, that is: "I'm angry, I'm greedy, I'm jealous", and then we transform them. Seeing these negative emotions, we recognize they cause a lot of trouble, we change them. We are in charge of our minds. We are the masters of our mind, not slaves of it.

Genuine spiritual people, you can see it, are not overcome by negative emotions like ordinary people, because they are masters of their own mental processes. The energy is still there, it's not like they would be like sheep, they are not rabbits, but their energy is channeled into higher frequency. It doesn't go down, it is not dissipated, so first we must become aware of what is happening in the mind at each moment. When anger, when greed, when pride or

anything else come up, we recognize that. Then, we know what to avoid, which is negative emotions, and what to encourage and adapt to, i.e., our positive emotions. In this way, we just practice transforming our negative emotions into positive emotions.

It's not that we don't have emotions, but we don't need to give in to negative ones, we can use that energy and turn it into positive channels. When you meet great masters, you can see they are more alive than ordinary people. They are not blank, their emotions are love, compassion, kindness, generosity, good humor. Their eyes are sparkling. When we meet great masters of any tradition, be them Hindu, Sufi, Christian masters, any master – it's all in their eyes, their eyes are shining!

6) *Lwiis : You said about your life as a woman : "hormones have never been an obstacle, my periods never bothered me. And I think people make a big deal of menopause and pre-menstrual-syndrome, I've also noticed that men are moodier than women "p.192. The general impression in the traditional and religious milieu is opposed to what you said, they say that women during her menstruations are impure. They are not even allowed to pray or perform any rites, their menstruations cause them to have many mood swings, unlike male physiology which is more stable... What do you think about this?*

TP : I think that is total male prejudice. This is like the boys which are supposed to be better at studying books... The old idea of woman being impure during menstruation is a way for the men to make her feel inferior, by insisting on this supposed impurity. In fact, if there were no menstruations, there would be no people, because that's a part of the cycle for women to give birth.

If it was the men who had to deal with having period every month, then they would consider themselves very heroic, presenting themselves as having great strength and fortitude to be able to bear this every month, and of course women will not be able to do this because they are too weak, only men would be the ones who could do it! If it was men having period, that's how they would be treated, as if they had something special and they were great heroes to bear it!

Here, we have more than hundred nuns, about 120 nuns who perform all the rituals, and attend all the philosophy classes, without any complaint or any fuss. There is no question for them having periods or not, nobody cares, they just carry on their work as always. They are not considered impure, and they don't even think about it. I've never noticed they have any particular mood swing; they just carry on cheerfully as usual. Some of them now are beginning to go into maybe 50 years old, a few of them, thus, they are going to go for menopause, but that doesn't affect them emotionally, they don't even know that it is supposed to affect them. They have not been taught that!

I remember when I was at school nobody taught about it, you carried on as usual, you didn't know you were supposed to be emotionally fragile that time. I think it's just a very fashionable to discuss all these hormone changes. Of course, some people do have some problem, but I suggest the majority never do. As I just said, here, I am surrounded by all these young women, who must have menstruations constantly, but they do it very discretely, and they don't make any fuss at all. As I said, they carry on, with everything, including their rituals and meditation, their studies and everything, nobody makes any fuss.

Lwiis : In Buddhism is there any restriction for women when she is in period, for rituals etc. like in Hinduism... ?

TP : Not at all !...

Lwiis : Because in Hinduism also in Islam Judaism, there is...

TP : I think that in these religions, especially Judaism and Islam, this question of impurity is important and maybe also in Hinduism which got influenced by Islam. However, in Buddhism, there is nothing about it at all. The only thing in the monastic rules about periods is that women during that time are allowed to wear extra-garments, and that's all they say about it, nothing else.

Lwiis : So, can they do all the rituals without any restriction?

TP : Nothing of all this! They are not considered to be in any way impure, they just carry-on as usual

Lwiis : It's something new for me because all the religions have so many restrictions about this question of periods. Even in Christianity, women cannot be priest because they say that when they have menstruation, they are impure...

TP : Certainly, these religions have some customs in common...but some are different: for example, in Buddhism, when you go into a temple, or when you are listening to a Dharma teaching, you should keep your head uncovered. You are not allowed to teach Dharma to people who have head covered, obviously, because at that time, in India, to keep your head uncovered was a sign of respect. On the contrary, nowadays in Hindu temples, women are covering themselves and that, they got from Islam because in the Abrahamic religions, you keep your head covered, and in Christianity you just have to wear a hat to go to the church. Still, in Hinduism and Buddhism, this is originally the opposite: if I have my head covered and if I go to the temple, I have to take it off. Obviously in the Middle East it was a custom you keep your head covered, for some reason in India it was a custom to uncover it. So, it's all custom!

Lwiis : Do you think it's just a custom, it's not rules inspired by the Divine?

TP : If you cover your head, you have your reasons, if you uncover your head you have your reasons too... both side are respectable.

Lwiis : Why in Buddhism, monks and nuns shave their head?

TP: For one thing, people are very proud of their hair, it's a sign of beauty.

Lwiis : It's like in Islam it's a sign of beauty, so to not tempt men they impose to cover the head...

TP : Thus, to shave your head it's to remove your beauty. Also, it's much more practical, you don't always have to wash your hair. Keep it clean is a big nuisance especially if you're on the road, and people when they see you shave your hair, know you are a monk or a nun.

Lwiis : Peoples can understand for a man who shave his hair, but for a woman it's a little bit hard to understand it...

TP : Still, it's beautiful, because you see these girls coming with long beautiful hair, then they all cut and shave it, and they are smiling, they are so happy, you know, because it's

renunciation, it's to renounce the world. You have to wear unflattering clothing, you lose your beauty by having your hair cut...Often, indeed, they look better by shaving, because you can see their face. Still, their main idea by doing this is the renunciation.

7) *Lwiis* : *In the same context you said: "The difference between man and a woman is external, but inside the heart, it's the same, what is enlightenment but the knowledge of the heart?" p194. Do anatomic and physiological differences between the two sexes have a decisive influence on the level or spiritual evolution?*

TP : During the basic practice , when you're sitting and meditating, you are not a man, you're not a woman; really, that point of gender is a totally wrong one. For example, while sitting, watching the breath, watching the mind, the thoughts, analyzing the mind and the mental formations – male or female are the same, I don't see there is that much difference. Of course, women meditation teachers, even male ones, have said that woman are usually more intuitive, men tending to be more analytical, liking to go up step-by-step. Women are able to just jump and fly; they feel they are not threatened by intuition so much, so, in that way, teachers often said: "The women are better in meditation than the men".

In Tantra for example, one sees oneself as deity, male deity or female deity, you can see yourself as Tara, you can see yourself as Tchenrezi, one is a female, one is male: still, men are able to see themselves as Tara and women can see themselves as Tchenrezi. Or else, they can see themselves as their own gender, it doesn't matter. In this way, they do meditations in which they see themselves as male or female. Thus, they interchange, it's not that the boys see themselves only as male deities or girls only as female deities, they can do both, do you understand what I'm saying? In general, women are more in touch with their emotions as boy are told not to be emotional: we hear: "big boys don't cry ", these types of things... Men tend to have harder time relating to their emotions, but I think that's part of a given training, the way they've been brought up.

Girls are allowed to be emotional, women do so because also they are intended by nature to be mothers and are much more in tune with their emotions, like loving kindness, compassion, and things like this. They feel at home with that because they have always been so... It's part of who they are, little girls tend to cuddle their toys, as boys use them to fight with... In that way there is some differences. Still, some men are very intuitive and very at home with their emotions, some women are very distant from these, and have a very analytical mind ... I mean we can't make huge generalization. It's just an overall approach.

Lwiis : *Sometimes in spirituality and also in normal life , we can see women with men qualities and men with woman qualities, what is the cause of this according to you? Is it that in real meditation, we are beyond male and female?*

TP : Yes! Yes, and of course the nature of the mind, the non-dual and primordial awareness is definitely beyond gender, there's no question of that! It's only the ordinary conceptual mind which relate to male or female body, that make gender.

Lwiis : *in Nirvana, are we beyond male and female?*

TP : Great Masters are, on the whole, neither male nor female, it doesn't mean they are effeminate. But you feel there is something almost female about them. They are not kind of mature males; they have a touch of motherliness. This is the case of almost all genuine masters, they bring together the two sides, they have balance between male and female energies.

8) *Lwiis* : You said : “The modern scientific approach has given so much importance to the brain, that we are in conflict and cut off from the reality of the heart; this is why many people feel that life is infertile and meaningless” page 175. So, how do we reestablish a good connection with the heart on both the social and spiritual level?

TP : I think it's very important that we cultivate those qualities associated with the heart, such as in Buddhism, where there is something called the *Four Immeasurable* : loving kindness, compassion, joy about the goodness of others, and equanimity. These kinds of emotions, if we are cultivating love and kindness and compassion, bring attention down to the center of our beings, they are not purely cerebral. They reach much deeper levels, which become thus activated. This process is very important for everybody: for example, in *Tonglen*, “sending and receiving”, we visualize taking in the outer suffering into the breath down into the center of the heart, and then sending out light, love and healing again from the center of the heart through the breathing out. So, you are always centering yourself back into the heart region, heart chakra. Moreover, we can visualize the divine, whatever we think about divine, in heart chakra. To take an example: if you have a very close relationship with your teacher, your guru, you can see your teacher in your heart center, or you could see Jesus, or you could see the Buddha, you could see whosoever, just as a light here at the heart, even during the day, to open up the heart and stop it from being so closed on itself...

Moreover, when we meet with others, let's wish them well, recognizing that all beings want happiness, don't want suffering, they long to feel better than worse. This feeling of empathy for the suffering of others and wishing the well-being comes from a deeper level inside us and if we are really meditating at a deep level, that also slips from the head down into the center of being: I mean, the real center of our wellness is here rather than up in the head. The head and the heart are balanced together, they make us a whole. It doesn't mean we are just only emotions, we also have intellect and intelligence, but the two should come together, our natural wisdom and at the same time our compassion. Thus, we work on it, if we are not in contact with our positive emotions, then let's meditate until we are in contact!

Lwiis : Will it come ?

TP : Of course, it's our true nature, which is loving kindness and compassion and wisdom, so we are just coming back to whom we really are. Still, too often, people close the door, and they cannot see it anymore. They are out of contact with their true nature.

Lwiis : We have to recover our true nature, which is compassion and love...

TP : ...and wisdom. There is this clear seeing of what things really are, and the more we see how things really are, the more compassion arises, because we see how completely messed up we are, and how messed up is everybody else. Consequently, we feel so much compassion for all!

9) *Lwiis* : You tell a very beautiful and wonderful dream in your book, the dream of the world as a multilevel prison in which all people are jailed. Have you, you at least, got out of this prison? And as for us, could we hope to get out of it before the realization and the end of the cycle of samsara?

TP : The prison house of the samsara exists for as long as we believe that there is an “I” or “Me” who is living in this prison : the prison house of the samsara is actually the ego. As long

as we are driven by our ego, we are going to be stuck in the jail; be it high in the penthouse or down in the donjon, we are trapped by our ignorance. Consequently, the key is wisdom, the key is to recognize that this small self is what is covering our true nature, which is something quite beyond that: when the small self dissolves, then we realize our true nature, then there is no more prison house. Still, this is very difficult, that's why we practice.

As for me, I am trapped in the prison as anybody, don't think I've escaped. However, there are those who had, and that's why they come back to show us how to open up the door. The whole point of bodhisattva is that they don't just leave the prison themselves, abandoning everybody else behind. They keep coming back until finally the prison house is empty.

Lwiis : This dream is a wonderful story. Is it your own dream or did you get it from some scripture?

TP : It's meaningful because it recognizes that even if we're living up in a wonderful-looking environment, having parties all the time, or on the contrary if we're being down in dungeons, being tortured, whatever we're doing, we still are all trapped. Nonetheless, there is a way out, that was the point in the dream: we can escape, even though it's not so easy.

Lwiis: When I read this story of the dream, I thought its author should be a real bodhisattva to have had it!

TP : The whole point is the prison house dissolved when one stopped running away from oneself, but ran in order to help others for also escape. That came into the mind and then the dream changed and became quite different. It's important to recognize that at this moment, we are caught up in this prison house, however nice may appear, however difficult it may appear, and that it's very insecure. Indeed, people go up and can go down, people are down and can go up, it's always changing.

10) Lwiis : You said "people claim they have no time to meditate, this is not true! you can meditate while walking in a corridor, while waiting in the queue, at the traffic light etc." p228. In this case, any act one does can be meditation, but that is precisely what we don't feel ... how then can we transform the banal acts of daily life into a meditation, especially since these acts are often a source of negative emotions: they make us angry, they make us afraid, make us sad, etc. How can we separate these acts from the negative emotions?

TP : This is the essence of mindfulness practice; to learn how to be more aware. In Buddhism, mindfulness actually means the awareness of what should be avoided, which is negative emotion, and what should be adopted, which is positive emotion. So, when we see some negative emotion in the mind we recognize it immediately, and having observed it, we have the opportunity to change it. This is the point; therefore, we change anger into forbearance, greed into detachment and into generosity etc. What's crucial is to recognize thoughts and emotions, at the very moment when they arise. Moreover, the Buddha told we should learn how to be aware in the four postures: lying, sitting, standing immobile and walking.

We accept that "I'm angry" or "I'm greedy, this is greed..." "So, then we see it, we accept it, it's not that we suppress it. We recognize "this is what it is"... Then, we can change it, then anger get changed into forbearance and patience, and greed into generosity or contentment... In physical movements too, Buddha said that while standing or sitting, walking or lying down, we should be aware of that: in this sense, we can start by taking simple actions like cleaning our teeth, drinking a cup of tea ... Instead of doing it mindlessly, as when you're drinking your tea and you think about something else... On the contrary, we should give a lot

of attention to that, not thinking about it, but just knowing that action. “How is it, how do we feel about it, what is the mind doing, what is the body doing?”. In this way, we bring our attention to what is actually happening in the moment, instead of always be calling up in the past, or in the future, or running around in the present. This is a basis for learning how to become the master of our mind, instead of, as usual, being slave to whatever our mind is thinking.

A very easy thing too, is to practice being aware of breathing. Normally, we breathe but we are not aware we are breathing; so, when we get agitated during the day, we could just bring the attention to the breathing in and breathing out. Bring the mind into the present, because we don't breathe in the past or the future, we just breathe now. In this way, if we are conscious of the breath, we are present. Otherwise, the mind gets strained. The Buddha said that our mind was a “mad monkey” and we have to tame it, if we want genuine peace and happiness in our heart.

11) Lwiis : Concerning the major issue of celibate, you said: “Celibacy remains a relevant and very important issue. It has a purpose. Not only does it free the body, but it clears the mind, it also frees the emotions” p233. Is this why most of saints, whatever the spiritual tradition, are celibate? And how does celibate relieve the emotions?

TP : Real celibate involves the mind, it involves the thoughts and emotions, it's not enough to refrain from sexual activity. Still, at the same time, when we engage with sex, then of course our feelings are also engaged, with attraction, desire and lust. In this manner, we get attached and often very disturbed emotionally as well as physically. Thus, if we refrain from sexual activity with the whole being, that's mean with the mind as well as with the body, that energy can be channeled into other areas, such as creativity or devotion, meditation. It releases those emotions which are usually caught up in the physical, and it allows the mind freedom to redirect our energies and our concentration.

Nevertheless, on the other hand, some practices also make use of this sexual energy to open up the inner channels and chakras. This is the case for example for the yoga of Kundalini as well as the *Tumo*, the heat body, one set of practices among the Tibetans.

Moreover, we should remark that many masters are married and some of them have families: it's not that sex *per se* is a good or a bad thing, it depends how we make use of it. Still, for ordinary people, sometimes at least, at period of celibacy can be very helpful, for just leaving the mind free to think of something else!

Lwiis: So, could we be celibate for a limit period, not all life?

TP : Yes , for example when people are going into retreats, then they are celibate, often they are also in silence. Some people take a vow of celibacy for a certain period of time, six months, one year, etc. In this manner, they can use this time not to get caught up in attraction to this one or that one, but to keep their mind focused perhaps on spiritual practices or whatever they're doing: it doesn't have to be lifelong!

For example, in Thailand, the custom for all men, all boys, is to become monk for a certain period, a few weeks, a few months or maybe one year. This represents a transition from being a boy to being a man, you must have been a monk for a certain amount of time. Even the king of Thailand was a monk for a while. It's a part of their tradition to take temporary ordination.

Lwiis : Even in Hinduism, in some periods of life, we could be celibate and after get married, periods are different, its changing...

TP : Quite so! It can be very helpful for people, even only for limited time, to put their energy to what they are doing instead of getting distracted by their attractions, to keep their mind focused on what they're doing!