

A Vision of Buddhist Education from Central Europe

*Dr. Tamas Agocs
Budapest Buddhist University (BBU), Hungary*

It is a great honour for me to present this paper at the All Buddhist Universities Symposium of the United Nations Vesak Celebration in Bangkok. My presentation consists of two parts: (1) A Brief Introduction to the History and Activities of the Budapest Buddhist University, (2) Opportunities and Challenges for Buddhist Education in Europe.

1. A Brief Introduction to the History and Activities of BBU

The Budapest Buddhist University is a unique Buddhist institution of tertiary education that is recognised, accredited and financed by a Western government. It was founded in 1991 as a Buddhist college by an association of diverse communities called "The Gate of Dharma" Buddhist Foundation – a multi-traditional umbrella organization for both Theravāda and Mahāyāna groups representing a wide spectrum of Dharma lineages and inspirations. They stated the general principles of the Buddhist College in a foundation letter:

The Gate of Dharma Buddhist College shall propagate the teachings of the universal Buddhist tradition. It shall not represent any particular school but shall provide opportunity for the study of the Buddhist teachings of all schools. It will realize that goal as applicable to the present age with its conditions and specifically in order to clarify a common spiritual background for all Buddhist traditions and help them to work together.

The "Gate of Dharma" Buddhist College started in a rented apartment with nine volunteer lecturers and sixty students. Now it has two modest-size buildings, twenty-five full-time teachers (nine with PhD's), eight part-time academic teachers and three hundred and forty students. Teaching staff consists of Dharma teachers, Buddhist scholars, philosophers and language teachers. Their common vision of Buddhist education was articulated in a Mission Statement (See Appendix 1), an extended version of the founding letter.

Following a long process of curriculum development, a 4-year Buddhist training program was accredited in 1999. On fulfilling a number of additional criteria set by the Hungarian Accreditation Committee, accreditation was finally reconfirmed in 2001. With the introduction of the new law of tertiary education in 2005, the Buddhist College joined the Bologna process¹ and was one of the first Hungarian institutions of higher education to be re-accredited in the new tertiary educational system. In 2006 a new 3-year BA program was started, to be followed by a 2-year MA program scheduled to start in September 2007. Training was thus extended from four to five years and in effect the "Buddhist College" developed into a university meeting European standards.

The BA program consists of a mandatory core curriculum and a chosen study track (called a specialization). These include Dharma teaching, Comparative Religion and Philosophy, Indic language and Indian culture, Tibetan language and culture, Chinese language and culture, Japanese language and culture and professional training in Martial Arts.

Core curriculum consists of six modules. (A module is a set of interlinking courses distributed over several semesters). The backbone of the curriculum is comprised of a double set of courses on Buddhist philosophy – covering the historical development of Buddhist ideas in India – and Buddhist meditation, offering insight into the truth or experiential value of those ideas. These are supplemented by modules on Indian Philosophy (as background to the development of Buddhist thought and practice), Buddhist culture and history (focussing on the historical aspects of that development in India and other main Buddhist cultural areas), Buddhist scriptures (studies in Buddhist canonical literature) and a module called "Foundations of Religion and Philosophy" consisting of seven courses to set the Buddhist teaching in context for the Western student.

Specialization in **Dharma teaching** is meant to deepen and augment the Buddhist core curriculum both in practice and theory. It consists of a general program and a more specialized training in one of the major Buddhist traditions: Theravāda, Mahāyāna or Vajrayāna. The general part offers courses on Buddhist ethics and sciences (such as cosmology and symbols), as well as additional training in the practice and theory of Buddhist meditation. Theravāda, Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna tracks offer in-depth study of a particular Buddhist tradition augmented by a basic knowledge of the original language of that tradition (e.g. Pali, Sanskrit or Tibetan).

Specialization in **Comparative Religion and Philosophy** offers comprehensive

¹ The purpose of the Bologna process is to create the European higher education area by making academic degree standards and quality assurance standards more comparable and compatible throughout Europe.

knowledge of the history of the different world religions, their basic teachings and scriptures, the fundamental issues of cultural anthropology, the main traditions of Eastern and Western philosophy and their most prominent thinkers with their main works and ideas. Training in the specialization thus concentrates on the different religions and philosophical systems. Its primary aim is to put Buddhist religious and philosophical ideas into a wider context, thus encouraging comparative and interdisciplinary scholarship between Buddhism and different Western disciplines.

Specializations in **Buddhist Languages and Culture** (Indian, Tibetan, Chinese and Japanese) offer in-depth study of a particular Buddhist tradition along with its language, history, literature and other cultural aspects. Students taking up these specializations may become Buddhist translators from the language of their choice, or they may want to utilize their language skills in other areas.

Specialization in **Martial Arts Professional Training** is an option is for those who wish to develop their spiritual skills through practicing and teaching a martial art related to a traditional Buddhist culture. We teach aikido and karate.

The **MA program** seeks to deepen and widen the scope of theoretical and practical skills acquired in the BA program. **Core curriculum** is composed of modules in Buddhist philosophy, meditation practice, scripture studies and engaged Buddhist studies, which offers a selection of courses on the practical applications of Buddhist theory and practice in the West. These include a range of interdisciplinary subjects and courses in comparative religion. Students specializing in **Dharma Teaching** will be offered further modules in Buddhist ethics and psychology, Buddhist education, comparative philosophy and the sacred languages of Buddhism. Training in **Buddhist languages and cultures** and **Comparative Religion and Philosophy** will also continue on the MA level.

BA in Buddhist Theory and practice is offered to:

- (1) Buddhists who would like to gain an overall view of Buddhism, study the evolution of the Dharma in its original Indian context with the history of the main schools and practice lineages, and learn some comparative ideas with Western disciplines
- (2) Non-Buddhists who want to gain good theoretical and experiential knowledge of Buddhism
- (3) Academic scholars of Buddhism wishing to augment their skills with some meditation practice

MA degree will be offered to:

- (1) Students holding BA in Buddhist studies wishing to deepen their knowledge and skills
- (2) Buddhist students or teachers who are trained in a contemporary practice lineage (such as Tibetan, Zen or Theravada), but who wish to learn more about the over-all Buddhist tradition, particularly the development of Buddhist thought in India. They may want to pursue this in order to put their own tradition into perspective and see its interconnections with other philosophical schools and lineages.
- (3) Buddhist or non-Buddhists who have some prior knowledge of the Dharma and are interested in the practical application of the Buddhadharma in modern life.

These categories are not meant to be exclusive as there may be many more reasons why one would want to pursue a degree in Buddhist theory and practice. Presently both of our programs run in the Hungarian language. We are planning to offer programs in English within a few years.

Please see **Appendix 1** for the Mission Statement of the "Gate of Dharma" Buddhist College.

2. Opportunities and Challenges for Buddhist Education in Europe

In contrast with most Asian countries represented on this symposium, Europe does not have a tradition of Buddhist education. In fact, the Dharma arrived in that continent (actually just an appendix to Asia) fairly recently, just over a century ago. One hundred years is not very long time for the Dharma to take root. It is only a beginning and all beginnings are difficult. In general, there is much confusion about the essence of the Dharma, what constitutes "true" or "original Buddhism, or how the different traditions relate to each other. The very notion of "Buddhism" is a problematic one. Though generally characterized as a religion, a growing number of Western Buddhists feel uncomfortable with that classification and prefer to treat Buddhism either as a philosophy, psychology, or as science. None of those Western concepts, however, do justice to Buddhism, which seems to cut across all conceptual categories. (Proud of its intellectual history, Europe tends to view other cultures through its own looking-glass, imposing limiting concepts on "the other".) Individual people who practice the Dharma may overcome those conceptual distinctions and realize the Buddha's teaching as a method to see through *dukkha*. Nevertheless, Buddhism cannot be considered a scientific method in the Western sense of the term.

When considered as a religion, Buddhism can be studied in two ways: from within or from without. "Non-historical religions", which are not deeply rooted in European culture, are traditionally studied from without, which means "scientifically", "objectively", without any emotional or personal involvement (just as one would study a plant or a galaxy). As European fascination with "the Orient" started in the 18th century, Eastern cultures soon became objects of scientific investigation. Consequently many European universities developed a tradition of oriental scholarship focusing on the study of texts. Insofar as these texts are Buddhist, we may speak of the study of Buddhism in those institutions. However, these studies fall under the rubric of linguistics and philology and cannot be considered as examples of Buddhist education in the traditional sense, where textual study is only part of the training. More recently, based on the study of various Buddhist sources and combining methods of philology and cultural anthropology, the science of "Buddhology" developed, which aims to study Buddhism in its historical context. Though these studies may greatly enhance our understanding of Buddhism, they do not go beyond the academic style of "objective" inquiry and hence again cannot be characterised as Buddhist education. Individual, mental, spiritual development (liberation, or enlightenment), which is the ultimate goal of traditional Buddhist training, is clearly outside the scope of Western academia, which thus cannot be expected to host Buddhist educational programs. Finally, Buddhism may be studied from within all over Europe in different Dharma-centres. Their training programs, however, do not have academic accreditation and thus do not qualify as higher education, however high their standards might be.

A fully qualified system of Buddhist education in Europe must meet two different criteria: one set by the Buddhist tradition and another by Western scholarship. The two are not easy to bring into line. Generally speaking, Western standards are based on the objective measurability of one's knowledge and skills in a certain area, without much concern for the rest of the person's demeanour. In the Buddhist sense, however, the development of skills and understanding goes hand in hand with personal advancement in morality and concentration. Development in such mental skills is not easy to measure. More significantly, academic commitment demands impartiality towards one's object of study, which is in striking contrast with what is expected in a traditional Buddhist school. The basic difference between the two sets of expectations seems to lie in their respective understandings of the use of knowledge, i.e., what learning is good for. In the European intellectual tradition, as shown by Foucault and other post-modernist thinkers, knowledge is power. It is a means to control

and manipulate the world. By objectifying our field of study we render it manageable and, at the same time, define ourselves in relation to that object. Thus we solidify our sense of ego. Learning in the Buddhist sense is ultimately aimed at developing *paññā* or wisdom, an intuitive understanding of reality beyond words. Buddhist wisdom cannot be used to control and manipulate others or solidify one's ego; on the contrary, it reveals the futility of these human concerns. Far from lulling the self into a false sense of security, it eventually dissolves it. No academic board in the West would recognize this as a reasonable objective.

All this goes to show that Buddhism does not conform to our Western categories and expectations of what a religious or scientific discipline should look like. The distinction between science and religion is a European cultural heritage retraceable to a split between reason and faith as Christian dogma failed to accommodate the findings of scientific observation. As the scientific method proved more and more successful in predicting the behaviour of objects in the natural world, religious modes of understanding came to be discredited or relegated to a "transcendent" world. The two seemed to have no relation to each other. This characteristically Western duality is reflected in the epistemic incompatibility between "objective" scientific study and "subjective" religious experience. When Buddhism is classified as a religion, it is reduced to a belief system. When treated as a science, it tends to be divested of its devotional aspect. Institutionally, the challenge for Buddhist Education in Europe in the 21st century is whether we can develop an institutional framework free from the academic/religious distinction. We should also devise programs that avoid one-sided emphasis on either intellectual or spiritual training, thus helping to restore the integrity of human experience.

Spiritually, our main challenge seems to be the healing of that very split in the Western mind/psyche, which makes the categorisation of Buddhism so difficult. It is the dominance of reason resulting from that split that lies at the heart of all "evils" we associate with modern society. Barred from its internal dimension, the divided Western mind sought to control its surroundings and set out to conquer the outside world – intellectually (developing science), economically (applied technology) and physically (imperialism). The technical revolution, which changed the face of the earth so drastically within the last two centuries, also derives from the dominance of the rational ego. Starting out from Europe the "white man" colonized the people of other races, exploited their natural and human resources – and continue to do so, albeit in a different guise: *Consumer capitalism*, which like a virulent disease has now spread all over the world, *is a new kind of imperialism*. Wherever it reaches,

it spreads economic competition, exploitation and poverty, alienation and dissatisfaction, effacement of people's culture and destruction of their environment. While imperialism was once justified by the alleged supremacy of European/Western reason, the 20th century has shown that haughtiness was unfounded. But that sense of intellectual superiority is still haunting Western culture, despite post-modernist attempts to deconstruct its modern mythologies.

Buddhism can give us key insights into the re-evaluation of our culture. In his fascinating study of European intellectual history from a Buddhist perspective, David L. Roy attributes the ailments of the Western mind (which can be expressed in a single word "individualism") to a basic sense of lack (or absence) – of self and substance in general; failing to come to terms with the truth of *anattā*: “The problem arises when the conditioned consciousness wants to ground itself – i.e. to make itself real. Since the sense-of-self ‘inside’ is an always unfinished, never secure construct, its efforts to real-ize itself are attempts to objectify itself in some fashion in the world. The ego-self is this never-ending project to realize oneself by objectifying oneself, something consciousness can no more do than a hand grasp itself, or an eye see itself. The consequence of this perpetual failure is that the sense-of-self is shadowed by a sense-of-lack, which always tries to escape. (...) We experience this deep sense of lack as the feeling that ‘there is something wrong with me’, but that feeling manifests, and we respond to it, in many different ways. In its ‘purer’ form lack appears as what might be called an ontological guilt or anxiety that gnaws at one’s very core. For that reason ontological guilt tends to become guilt for something, because then we know how to atone for it; and anxiety is eager to objectify into fear of something, because we know how to defend ourselves against particular feared things.”²

From a Buddhist perspective, the history of Western civilization can be seen as a series of unsuccessful attempts to resolve that basic sense of insufficiency arising from *tanhā*, the craving for substance. We have projected our fears and cravings onto different concepts such as freedom, God, progress, reason, romantic love, fame and money (to name just a few), none of which can give us true satisfaction. These Western myths, however, still linger on in the public imagination, still dominating our everyday thinking. Our cultural myths give us justification to act out our impulses to get what we want and secure our own interests both at the individual and the collective level. In our outwardly directed search for happiness and freedom we fail to acknowledge that true peace and contentment can only be found within.

² David L. Roy: A Buddhist History of the West, Studies in Lack, State University of New York Press (2002), pp 4-5.

We are alienated from ourselves and do not dare to look what is going on inside us. Nothing that cannot be concretized externally seems to be of value. The average European citizen leads a life destitute of meaning, his mind conditioned by the commercial industry with its mass media propaganda. Alienated from direct sensory experience and his own emotions, he lives in a mediated world of concepts and images. Conditioned to believe in the absolute existence of good and evil, he is condemned to an internal battle between those two forces, a struggle that he also projects to the outside world.

Based on that Buddhist analysis, what the Western mind would seem to need is just the medicine of the Dharma to relieve it from the burden of self-importance. Given the sorry predicament of the Western mind (irony), the Buddha's teaching of mental peace and integrity should be expected to find fertile soil in Europe. Nevertheless, it fails to acknowledge its poverty and defends itself with comfortable barriers. In Western school systems there is still one-sided emphasis on the achievements of Western civilization, and material advancement in general, often to the diminishment of other peoples' contributions to the shaping of the world. Alternatives to the Western modes of thinking are rarely considered. (Though exceptions now do exist) Though excessive individualism of the West may now be on the decline, Europe is left with cynicism, nihilism and a growing sense of despair at what is seen by many as the throes of a dying civilization. By the end of the last century Europe has arrived at a spiritual crisis. What it badly needs now is real spiritual values. Buddhism is apparently not the only possible remedy to that situation, but it would certainly be helpful if Buddhist teachings about the nature of reality gained wider recognition. The most attractive feature of Buddhism for the Western mind is its promise of happiness and freedom, however misunderstood these concepts may be in Western mythology. In post-modern thinking the individual mind is seen as thoroughly conditioned by the historical contingencies and circumstances in which he/she is embedded. Such a view leaves no room for free will and responsibility. The Buddhist teaching of no-self and emptiness with its emphasis on introspection may help us to see through our limiting concepts and discover that basic space between thoughts where true creativity lies.

The main challenge for Buddhist Education in Europe is to teach Buddhism in a cultural environment so different from its original setting in Asia. Such a wide cultural gap cannot be bridged by the mere transmission of Buddhist texts and practices as they were used in their original context. A Western audience asks different questions, their problems and challenges being quite different from those of students in traditional Buddhist countries.

Without giving too much emphasis on the differences (which would be a mistake), I would just like to make the point that teaching methods may have to change as the Dharma is coming to the West. What we seem to need is true insight into the essence of the Dharma and how it can be applied under the prevailing circumstances. We should certainly encourage traditional forms of learning and practice to survive and thrive in their new environment, but these forms need to be filled with meaning for the contemporary Western mind lest they remain empty forms. Since meaning is always derived from one's own life, Buddhism has to address the questions and challenges posed by the modern age (Europe in the 21st century) in order to become meaningful. It is also vital to establish significant links between Buddhism and different Western disciplines such as psychology or quantum physics, and find various applications of the Buddhist view in Western society. At the same time, Dharma practice should be emphasized to anchor one in direct experience and prevent Buddhism from being identified with a loose set of "views" about the world. In other words, Buddhism should not become just another discipline but continue as a living tradition of wisdom in the West.

The greatest challenge (and opportunity) for Buddhist education in the 21st century may be how to preserve and extend that vital function of the Dharma to all areas where suffering is present, or which can be seen as a source of suffering. In brief, the mission is to fight all forms of ignorance. In Western society, ignorance is present in the many kinds of wrong views that developed there over the centuries: wrong views of idealism, materialism, individualism, and nihilism. Many kinds of wrong views have been institutionalized and turned into dogmas (unquestionable articles of faith) or scientific disciplines. Applying Buddhist wisdom to all those belief systems, we should devise different Dharma antidotes to all those different kinds of ignorance – acknowledging that there is a trace of wisdom present in each. Technically speaking, the task is one of deconstruction and transformation – the deconstruction of wrong views and the transformation of the different Western disciplines to means of serving humankind and the planet. Though this may seem like an idealistic project, the purpose is already served by being fully open, rather than closed, to society and its problems. Present an attitude of unbiased inquiry into our actual sufferings and their causes, Buddhism can become a vital force in the 21st century.

As we move into the 3rd millennium, it seems that there has never been a time when the system of open inquiry, which underpins Buddhism, has been more necessary. As cultures and societies clash with one another, it would appear that the reflective means of inquiry and systematic methods of investigation that the Buddha put forward will be critical in

meeting the social, cultural, economical challenges presented to us by globalisation. We need to set up a major program of research into ways in which these tried and tested methods of investigation can enhance and ameliorate our collective experience in modern Western society. As the paradigms of communication, dialogue and research form in the new millennium, the voice of modern Buddhism can make a significant contribution through sharing its incisive insights as the various religious and scientific modes of inquiry currently jostle with one another. The open attitude of Buddhism should have a key role to play in these interdisciplinary dialogues. (See **Appendix 2** for an attempted demonstration of that function.) Using Buddhist principles we could also develop a model of a non-violent, compassionate economy based on reproducible energy resources – in an attempt to create a society in which everybody can fulfil their human potential. We need to find a way of seeing how Buddhist values, views and practices, can be significantly and beneficially applied within the context of this globalising culture.

Buddhist education in Europe should be based on universal Buddhism rather than any particular national or scholastic tradition. In the long run European Buddhism is benefiting from all Buddhist traditions existing today in Asian countries. The perspective that seems most relevant for European Buddhism today is the non-sectarian, or multi-traditional, perspective. In this approach there is no hierarchy between the different Buddhist schools. Rather, they are recognized as equally valid and effective methods for people with different aptitudes. Europe needs the Dharma, whether Theravāda or Mahāyana, Chinese, Tibetan, Japanese, or Southeast-Asian. We need to study and teach all these Buddhist traditions in their different manifestations, their histories and traditional relationships to society, their theoretical aspects and practical applications. In all that, we beseech the help of the great Buddhist universities in the world so that European people can inherit the full richness of the Buddhist tradition at this critical juncture in history.

And of course it is important that the way in which we teach the Dharma respects and integrates the conditions of the West. Despite the nihilism of the existentialists, or the irony of post-modernism new thinking and theories have emerged from science itself that could not only be compatible to some of the principles of Buddhism, but which could help inform the direction of Buddhist education and its organisation in Europe. I am thinking particularly of the theories of complexity and chaos which have emerged as metaphors for organisational design, and which are based on biological discoveries of the patternings of the universe. Here, organisations are not based on Newtonian physics, but are considered as ‘fluid, flowing

structures' which emerge through self-organisation. There is in some areas increasing emphasis on collaborative and participative inquiry, which addresses the inherent duality of the Western scientific method. James Lovelock's notion of Gaia too has predicated a natural, harmonious, living universe of which human beings are co-creators and co-inhabitants. Particularly in the field of psychotherapy, people are explicitly drawing upon, and utilising Buddhist understandings. Whilst we all need to be careful not to fall into our own dualistic mindsets, it seems that the time is right for the next unfolding of Buddhist education in Europe.

Appendices

1. Mission Statement of the "Gate of Dharma" Buddhist College

The Gate of Dharma Buddhist College is a religious school of higher education. The designation "Gate of Dharma" metaphorically refers to its main mission: to open the Gate of the Buddhist Teaching, or Dharma, to the public. This symbolic gesture manifests in the realisation and transmission of the Teaching.

The Dharma (or Buddhist teaching) may take manifold forms, but is chiefly found within ourselves. It is discovered by the individual on the spiritual path of awakening.

College teachers shall do their utmost to help students study and practice the Dharma. The Community shall consider all teachers and students equally as the Buddha's disciples.

Keeping true to the 2.500 years history of Buddhism, we shall realise the living Dharma under the present circumstances, in our own day and language and in a way that fits our own mentality.

We shall not consider any Buddhist school superior to any other. Rather, we shall recognise their equal validity and effectiveness for people with different aptitudes. We shall endeavour to study all Buddhist traditions and facilitate growth of a characteristically Hungarian (or European) tradition.

The College shall provide venue to Buddhist teachers of all traditions as well as academic scholars without any hierarchical distinction.

The College shall implement the above principles in its curriculum, teaching methods and examination system.

On top of regular classes, in order to deepen their understanding, students shall be given opportunity to engage in individual studies based on personal teacher-disciple relationships.

College training methods shall combine the transmission of factual information with developing practical skills needed for the inner realisation of the Teaching and emphasize spiritual autonomy.

We shall be open to dialogue with all religions and spiritual traditions that share the same open attitude with us.

It is our conviction that all religious traditions contribute significantly to the alleviation of suffering. With this consideration we shall do our best to serve and benefit humankind and each individual.

2. The Applicability of the Buddhist Concept of "Emptiness" in the Science-Religion Dialogue (Lecture delivered by the author at the Metanexus Conference "Science and Religion: Global Perspectives" in Philadelphia, USA, June 7th 2005)

The science-religion dialogue today is taking place mainly between theistic religions and modern science. Buddhism does not fit into either category. Although usually considered as a religion, it is also understood by many as a science, i.e.: a science of the mind. This apparent anomaly (both science and religion) may be due to the fact that Buddhism admits the role of both faith and reason in the understanding of reality. Due to this double-sided approach, Buddhism may have a special role to play in this very crucial encounter between various disciplines that is unfolding today. In my lecture I would like to demonstrate how the Buddhist concept of Emptiness can be utilized to create a common ground between science and religion in our new global society.

Emptiness, according to Buddhism, is the ultimate nature of reality. Though the word itself may suggest some negative connotations, emptiness in fact does not imply non-existence. It means that phenomena do not exist in and of themselves. Rather, they exist in *relations*. This relational existence is also termed "dependent" existence. Wholes, like a chair, do not exist in themselves, but rather as compositions of different parts: a seat, a number of legs etc. Similarly, the human being does not exist as a unitary entity, but as a composite depending on the various components of human experience, such as a body, different perceptions, feelings, thoughts etc. Another aspect of emptiness reveals that all observed phenomena depend on the mind of the observer. No object exists as such, but becomes a meaningful unit in the process of observation. In this sense, it is said that

everything is just designation. The observed object does not exist in itself; it just *becomes* something (either this or that) depending on the approach or attitude of the observer.

Quantum physics has provided scientific evidence of the truth of emptiness, although it is usually not presented as such. The elementary constituents of matter (photons, electrons) could not be identified in themselves, only in dependence of the observation process. Scientists have found that they behaved either as waves or as particles, depending on the experimental setup. Besides, it was found that one could not measure both the location and velocity of a particle at the same time, because the very act of measurement contributed to the result. This was termed the uncertainty principle. In short, no particle can be located or identified unambiguously in either time or space.

The Theory of Relativity also asserts that basic terms of classical physics -- such as mass, energy, time and space -- are relative concepts. They do not exist in themselves. Rather, they exist in relation, or depending on each other. Concerning the relation between the observer and the observed, Relativity Theory does not go as far as quantum physics. Hypothesizing a constant speed of light, it tacitly assumes the objective existence of space-time, and particles moving in it quite independently of the mind of the observer. Though Einstein found the idea of an indeterministic universe (i.e.: that not obeying any objectively verifiable physical laws) horrendous, science has since effectively proved that material reality has no absolute, ultimate essence that is independent of the theoretical context of the observer's mind.

This brings us to the question of the role consciousness has to play in the construction of reality. Can the whole of phenomenal reality be attributed to the mind? According to the standard interpretation of quantum mechanics, the act of observation collapses the wave function and realizes one possibility from a set of quantum probabilities. The fact that reality is formed by the act of observation has led some interpreters to conclude that the whole of reality is mental; everything is just an illusion of the mind. (In Buddhist philosophy, this view is represented by the *Cittamatra* or "Mind-only" school.) In the Buddhist (*Madhyamika*) analysis, however, even consciousness is found to be empty of inherent existence, because it does not exist in itself, i.e.: independent of any apprehended object.

The Buddhist view of emptiness thus implies that reality is irreducible to either matter or mind. Neither aspect of existence has any more substance than the other. This understanding reveals a deeper aspect of emptiness: the dependent arising of reality. There is no one-way causation, but a mutual dependence of external (material) and internal (mental)

factors, without either being primary or secondary. Classical physics was based on the assumption that the workings of nature could be explained by objective material laws acting independently of consciousness. Since the appearance of quantum physics, however, it has gradually dawned on us that material science alone cannot provide a satisfactory account of reality.

Now let us turn to religion. In most world religions (with the notable exception of Buddhism), ultimate reality is associated with an Absolute Being or God "beyond", or independent of, all chance and circumstance. Such Absolute Being is usually also identified as the supreme creator of the universe. According to Buddhist analysis, the notion of an Absolute Being is incompatible with the idea of creation, since the latter inevitably implies some (in fact, quite fundamental) change. Consequently, God is either not an independent, self-sustaining and permanent being, or s/he has nothing to do with creation. (The dilemma could also be rephrased in the famous question: "What was God doing before he created the world?") God is thus also just a designation. The emptiness of the God-concept, however, does not imply the non-existence of God. Rather, it implies the mutual dependence of God and humankind, the creator and the creation. This defines religion as a *relation* obtaining between two separate orders of reality, both of which are ultimately empty.

Buddhist reasoning into reality reveals the emptiness of the observed objects of both science and religion. Emptiness is the ultimate ground where science and religion can meet. Emptiness entails the relativity of all concepts, whether scientific or religious, but affirms the validity of both in their respective spheres. Emptiness connects and unites rigidly separated concepts, providing an all-embracing context in which all may attain its true meaning. Incidentally, this very emptiness is the ultimate nature of the mind - which cannot be characterized as either scientific or religious. Nevertheless, this very nature of mind is the ultimate source of *meaning*. This spontaneous production of meaning put in a comparative framework, conflating some Buddhist ideas with those of the great physicist David Bohm, is the topic of my paper I for Metanexus. (downloadable from Metanexus' homepage at <http://www.metanexus.net/conference2005/pdf/agocs.pdf>)

Dr. Tamás Agócs