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A Conversation with Professor Venerable Samdhong Rinpoche on the Vision and Legacy of His Holiness The Dalai Lama, Dharamshala, India December 2016

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Samdhong Rinpoche is a loving, intelligent, charitable and important spiritual leader who practices and teaches within the Gelugpa School of Tibetan Buddhism. He is a close associate of His Holiness, the 14th Dalai Lama. At the age of five, he was recognized as the incarnation of the 5th Samdhong Rinpoche and was enthroned at the Garden Dechenling Monastery in Jol, Tibet. He then took his vows as a monk at age seven. His outstanding scholarship to teach Tibetan Buddhist philosophy is deep and remarkable. He was appointed by His Holiness, The Dalai Lama, a member of the assembly of Tibetan People's Deputies in 1991. Within a few years, he was unanimously elected to be chairman. In 2001, the exiled people of Tibet elected him to be their prime minister by an astonishing 84% vote. Samdhong Rinpoche lives in a small, brightly lit, house in the shadow of the Dalai Lama's palace. A quote from a 2006 speech about [The Vision and Legacy of His Holiness The Dalai Lama](#) (2014) will help us understand why he is so respected and loved.

“The Buddha gave some very clear instructions in a sutra in the Pali canon called the Kalama Sutta, when he said:

Do not believe in anything simply because you heard it.

Do not believe in traditions because they have been handed down for many generations.

Do not believe in anything because it is spoken and rumored by many.

Do not believe in anything simply because it is found written in your religious books.

Do not believe in anything merely on the authority of your teachers and elders.

But after observation and analysis when you find that anything agrees with reason

And is conducive to the good and benefit of one and all –

Then accept it, and live up to it.”

Meeting Samdhong Rinpoche was a special joy. At 77 years old his eyes are bright and his steps lively. He was gracious, warm and engaging. This story begins two days before our meeting. The Chonor House, operated by the [Norbulingka Tibetan Arts Council](#), is the closest hotel to the Kalachakra temple. The Tibetan refugees were invited by the Prime Minister of India to live in McLeod Ganj, upper Dharamshala in 1959. They were exceptionally welcoming, kind, helpful and happy. These people have an ability to see the good in everyone. The Chonor House helped make the initial telephone call to schedule my appointment with Samdhong Rinpoche followed by confirmation the next day. It was here that I learned how universally loved, revered and respected Samdhong Rinpoche is to the Tibetan people.

Dawa Dhundup, chef of the Hummingbird Restaurant at the Chonor House, helped me make the confirmation call. So great was his awe for Samdhong Rinpoche that he was speechless. Dawa came as a refugee 16 years ago, and had experienced great tragedy in Tibet. His soft eyes filled with tears and furrowed brow gave glimpses of the pain of leaving Tibet and all he knew, to journey across the Himalayas to India. I immediately invited him to join our meeting. "*I would be too afraid*," he said, so I asked him if he would please walk with me to show the way.

When we arrived at the guard gate I asked Dawa to join me. He replied, "*No, I am too afraid. I wouldn't know what to say.*" With a big encouraging smile, I replied, "*That is an excellent reason why you should come.*" Sincerely he asked, "*Are you afraid to go alone?*" to which I answered a simple, "*No.*" He paused for a moment and finally decided to walk me to Samdhong Rinpoche's house. Upon arrival Samdhong Rinpoche and his secretary invited us both in. There was fast conversation in Tibetan followed by picture taking. Dawa, all smiles, then departed. Later he told me how wonderful Samdhong Rinpoche was to have invited him, an ordinary person, to sit with us. This generosity of spirit exemplifies who Samdhong Rinpoche is as a person: gracious, kind and inclusive.

Samdhong Rinpoche exchanged a Khata scarf blessing with me, and then sat down for tea and conversation. The Khata blessing symbolizes the sincerity on one's offering the beauty of prayer, purity, goodwill, auspiciousness, and compassion for each other. In the first half of our meeting he was interested to learn about my work and interests. I autographed two of our books: *The Breakout Heuristic: The New Neuroscience of Mirror Neurons, Consciousness and Creativity in Human Relationships* (Rossi, 2007) and *Creating Consciousness: How Therapists can facilitate Wonder, Wisdom, Truth and Beauty* (Rossi & Rossi, 2012). Samdhong Rinpoche had not yet heard of the neuroscience of ultradian rhythms and was fascinated about the new worlds of "*mirror neurons, gene expression, and brain plasticity*". He was intrigued about my passion to pair Hindu stories with yoga asana postures. I shared with him the ancient

story of Virabhadra, the Warrior, along with postures to his surprise and delight. The warrior is an expert in being prepared, acting swiftly and deftly when necessary, then letting go of what is no longer needed before taking a well-deserved rest. This was a perfect metaphor for him about the 4-stage creative cycle in modern Western psychotherapy.

I then turned the conversation to him. It is hard for me to imagine what it would be like to be a spiritual leader and to be in deep service to the people from age five. I was curious to learn what was personally important to him today. Whereas many people who come to Samdhong Rinpoche want something, I simply wanted to give.

“His Holiness, The Dalia Lama, is becoming older and has prostate cancer. What will you do if he passes on,” I enquired?

To this Samdhong Rinpoche responded in terms of the aging process, *“I don’t expect to live more than 5 years, and I have health problems of my own.”*

Our conversation turned to pivotal points of aging: mood, limiting physical dexterity and energy. I explained Ultradian rhythms as a natural vehicle for pacing one’s optimal self and mood in everyday life. Ultradian rhythms are our natural Basic Rest and Activity Cycle of our 4-stage creative cycle. There is a time to be active and help others and a time for rest to optimize our own consciousness, cognition and healing.

Samdhong Rinpoche then shared, *“Sometimes I get depressed and my body is in a great deal of pain. Is it psychosomatic or is it real?”*

Naturally, most of us have such feelings from time to time, particularly with aging. It was very interesting to me that he labeled his moods as depression. Now my opportunity to give had arrived. I shared with him that *“Depression”* is a Western idea that I think may not serve the world very well. Whereas sadness is a passing state, depression is a diagnosis and is fixed. I suggested, *“Could it be better to think of yourself as sad from time to time and wonder how and when your sadness will lift? Wouldn’t it be wonderful to not self-diagnose? What are Eastern thoughts on depression?”*

“This is very interesting to me as there is no word in the Tibetan language for depression,” Samdhong Rinpoche responded. *“There is a word for sadness,”* he said with deep concentration. I was reminded of Buddha’s words from the Kalama Sutta Samdhong Rinpoche offered in his 2006 speech, *“Do not believe in anything simply because you heard it or read it in a book.”*

“Aches and Pains can also be transient,” I offered, “Even within chronic pain there are peaks and valleys throughout the day. Become sensitive to those valleys when your pain is lowest could become important. The question now becomes, how long can you stretch the time of the smallest pain? Can you become sensitive to the times you are pain free and magnify your comfort? All of this is consistent with neuroscience research on gene expression, brain plasticity and Ultradian theory. Exercise is also important in order to live a pain free life.”

Samdhong Rinpoche replied. *“I can easily walk a kilometer on flat ground, but find it difficult to walk nearby my home.”*

I responded, *“I can certainly understand that living in the Himalayas! I watch carefully every step I take here on the uneven ground. In Dharamshala the stone steps are ancient, steep and uneven, probably set for trekkers. It is also easy to become distracted by the gorgeous views.”* Just then a huge commotion broke out above our heads with a troop of monkeys running across the roof. *“Is that an earthquake?”*

Samdhong Rinpoche said laughingly *“We get used to the monkeys, and yes, they create quite a pounding on the corrugated tin roof! No, this is not an earthquake.”*

Our time together came to a close. I made my way back to the Kalachakra temple to spin the Tibetan Mani prayer wheels. As I was chanting *“Om Mani Padme Hum”* I found myself resonating with mystery, richness and clarity of Tibetan Buddhist consciousness that shown through Samdhong Rinpoche, a living master. The following day, The Dalai Lama spoke in his native language at the Kalachakra temple for hours to both monks ready to depart Dharamshala and those who had just arrived from Tibet. His voice tone and tenor reminded me of a father speaking to his favorite child. I felt as though he spoke directly to me about the best, kindest, truest and gentle ways to live life in the *“outside”* world.

The wisdom Samdhong Rinpoche offered from the Pali cannon, *“After observation and analysis when you find that anything agrees with reason, and is conducive to the good and benefit of one and all – then accept it, and live up to it”* is fully alive in the Tibetan Buddhist community in Dharamshala.

References

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