

Roger on Buddhist Geeks

BG 172: The Core of Wisdom

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Episode Description:

We're joined again this week by professor and meditation teacher Roger Walsh. This week we dive into his study of the common practices seen in all of the world's wisdom traditions. He shares each of these practices, and then also explores with us the ancient tradition of Shamanism, which is estimated to be tens of thousands of years old. We explore how ancient Shamanism relates to the neo-shamanism and core shamanism practices being taught in the West today, how Shamanism might have been repressed during recent times, and also the difference between meditation, mental disorders, and shamanistic states.

Roger wraps up the conversation by expressing how he sees Buddhism having a unique role in helping us face the unique challenges and opportunities of our day. In this stirring topic he emphasizes the need to harness relevant technological mediums, to understand the difference between Buddhism crossing cultures and crossing eras, and the crucial link between the extraordinary challenges in the world today and the states of mind that Buddhism helps to cultivate.

Transcript:

Roger: This is the first time we've had all of the world's spiritual traditions available to us, so it's the first time we're able to see the commonalities both in the perspectives on reality in the mind and also in recognizing the common practices they possess. And furthermore, it's the first time we've had in the West a transpersonal psychology which is capable of doing justice to and appreciating the spiritual depths of these traditions.

Vince: Beautiful. Well, that's a perfect segue into my next question, which actually had to do with the book that you wrote entitled "Essential Spirituality", and in that book, after, I'm sure, a lot of time of research and practice you've sort of distilled what you'd seen as the seven core or essential practices of the world's different wisdom traditions, and I was wondering maybe just to start off with if you could share just a little bit about those practices? Maybe, you don't have to share about all of them if you don't remember all of them, but just some of the highlights, I guess.

Roger: Thanks, Vince, I'm glad you said "if you don't remember all of them," because I was wondering if I could pull them all up, but let's have a go at pulling them up when we can say a little about a couple of them. A foundation in all the authentic spiritual traditions is ethics. Without living ethically, one just isn't able to release craving and anger and guilt and jealousy and etc., so ethics is essential as a foundation for a spiritual life. Emotional transformation is the second practice. That is the reduction or release of painful destructive emotions, like anger and jealousy and fear, and the cultivation of positive ones, like love and compassion and joy. Then there's tensional training, developing the capacity for concentration and stability of mind. There's perceptual training so as to develop greater clarity or perception, also to develop spiritual vision. There's also the cultivation of wisdom, being able to see deeply into the nature of reality and live according to it or harmoniously with it and with other people. And of course there's service as both the means to awakening and the culmination of awakening, and the culmination of all these different practices. Actually, I just realized there's one practice I omitted, and that's transforming motivation, which has two components. One is reducing craving, and the second is shifting what it is we focus on getting. Shifting from more material things—money, sex, power, pleasure, etc.—to more subtle and spiritual goals.

Vince: Interesting. And I was wondering if there was a particular motive for your sort of distilling the essential aspects of the spiritual path, and if there's a benefit in focusing on what's essential rather than, say, in a particular tradition.

Roger: Well, Houston Smith said it very nicely, he said that we can generalize, and it's valuable to know about all the different practices and traditions, but at some stages it's also very valuable to dive deeply into one. So I don't see these oppositional in any way. For me, writing "Essential Spirituality" and identifying seven key practices that are common to the world's traditions was really motivated by several things. One, of course, my own curiosity. Second, this unique opportunity we have to actually recognize these common practices. Third, to find out what the world's traditions said, because if all the world's authentic spiritual traditions agree that, for example, ethics is crucial to a spiritual life, that really tells us something. If you have the great sages across centuries and cultures all saying living ethically is really important if you want to live happily and fully and spiritually, then that's a pretty powerful statement. So, it seemed to me it would be really valuable to know what sages across the world agree on. That's one thing, and then the book was also oriented towards the practical goal of providing some simple practices that anyone could do if they wanted either to supplement their own tradition or, for some people, as an introduction to spiritual life.

Vince: Very cool. And then your most recent book was really fascinating. In some ways, I was surprised to see that you had written it, because I saw the title, "The World of Shamanism". And then I saw that you're the author and I said, "Oh, that's interesting. I didn't even know that you were into the shamanistic traditions." And in that, you describe shamanism as the world's, sort of, most ancient spiritual and healing tradition, going back—I don't even remember—5,000-10,000 years, something like that.

Roger: Yeah, a long time, probably maybe even tens of thousands.

Vince: Wow. And it's interesting, because you point out also in that book that in the last few decades, maybe starting back in the '70s, there's a huge revival of interest in the shamanistic path and in the principles and practices. But, obviously, what we're calling shamanism now is probably a lot different than the way it was practiced 5,000-10,000 years ago. And I was wondering, maybe what the difference is and how we might describe someone who is a modern shaman or considers himself a modern shaman.

Roger: Okay, well, first off, we probably need to think about the different claims of contemporary shamans because shamanism is still a viable tradition after perhaps, tens of thousands of years. That is, in tribal cultures or even in some non-tribal cultures, there are people who are practicing as shamans, and shamans are recognized as healers and valued spiritual practitioners and healers. So, in the contemporary world, there are people who are still fitting into the more traditional cultural role.

Then in, for example, the West, we have growing numbers, large numbers, actually, of people who, out of an interest in shamanism and spiritual practices, in general, have learned either some or a large number of traditional practices, and may or may not call themselves shamans but have adopted certain of these practices either for their own use or to be of service to others. And those people are being given various names, "neo-shamanism" is one. People practice so-called "core shamanism", that is, the distilled common practices from a variety of different traditions.

Now, there's a debate about whether you can call people in the contemporary West, who just learned these practices outside their traditional cultural settings, real shamans, and that's a point of contention. But certainly, there are, as you point out, growing numbers of people in the West who are doing these practices, finding them valuable, and exploring the experiences, and in some cases, benefits that come from it.

Vince: Interesting. And I get the sense, when I talk to people that are into those sort of practices that there's a sense that this wisdom or these practices, outside of the traditional cultures that you mentioned, but, say, in the West, for instance, that sort of disappeared for a while or were even repressed culturally for a while. And I was wondering if you could say something about that.

Roger: Well, they're certainly lost. There's an interesting anthropological observation with regard to shamanism in different cultures. That is, shamans are the primary healers and spiritual practitioners or intermediary in tribal cultures. But then, as cultures become more complex, larger, and more hierarchical, more organized, shamans, as such, tend to disappear and to be replaced by a variety of different religious practitioners, for example, priests or mediums or people doing magic of one kind or another. So, it's almost as though the shamans were humankind's original general practitioners of the spiritual realm. And, then, as societies get more complex, shamans tend to disappear.

Now, as you mentioned, there's also an issue of repression. Certainly, in some places, the Soviet Union being one very drastic and tragic example, shamanism was suppressed. In fact, shamanic practitioners were sometimes killed. So, yes, there have been examples of suppression and the Church, of course, did not take kindly to shamans in various parts of the world. So, with this repression lifted in some of these cultures, shamanism is now reemerging and taking back some of its traditional roles. So, there's an interesting evolution now of shamanism's roles in society that's emerged over time.

Vince: Yeah, that's really fascinating. And then one thing I found really interesting, because as I was reading about shamanism, the question that came up for me naturally was, is this related to the, sort of, yogic and meditative traditions in the East? And how is this related to the way we think of different psychological problems? In the book, you mentioned schizophrenia in particular. And I guess, I was wanting to find out from you, because I know there's a chapter on this very topic, what you found are the overlap and differences between sort of the shamanic states, the yogic states, and then some of these psychological disorders.

Roger: Sure. Okay, there's a lot in that question, in fact, there are several questions on this, so let's see what we can do with them. First was about the relationship between shamanism and other traditions such as yoga. That's a point of debate that's not quite clear just how they relate, but Houston Smith, the great religious scholar, has suggested Shamanism is kind of a foundational religious practice from which a number of others sprung. One interesting distinction is that shamanism, traditionally, relies on external aids such as music and dance and drumming and chanting, for example. Whereas the yogic and contemplative practice is more oriented towards inner transformation by direct working with the mind, without necessarily as much in the way of external aids. So that's one evolutionary shift that's interesting.

The question as to the states of mind and states of consciousness and stages of development that emerge in these different traditions is one that's been a matter of debate earlier this century. There was an assumption that shamans were psychologically disturbed. And, unfortunately, psychiatrists/psychoanalysts—because of their unfamiliarity with cultural differences and their blindness to their own cultural assumptions—looked at shamanic experiences, found them very unusual or even bizarre. And since the psychiatrists/psychoanalysts weren't particularly aware of altered states of consciousness or some of the unusual deep experiences that can emerge in them, they tended to pathologize shamans and shamanic experiences and say these people are either hysterical, psychotic, or schizophrenic.

That was an unfortunate phase, but fortunately, the West and the mental health professionals grew out of that. And now, there's a recognition that shamans can be, not only healthy, but even exceptionally healthy members of their society and can be, in fact, some of the leaders, most contributory of their members. And as we look at the different states of consciousness that these traditions induced, and this is one of my own areas of interest in research, what I found was that, if you look very carefully at the states of consciousness of, say, shamanism and yoga and for example, Buddhist vipassana meditation, then, in fact, as you look closely, you can clearly differentiate the states of consciousness.

There are some overlaps, that is, in all these cases, people tap into the depths of the psyche and their own inner resources. But there are also very distinct differences when you look closely, and there's certainly major differences between the states of consciousness of shamanism and contemplative disciplines and of various psychopathologies. I think, at this stage, there's just no way anyone who knows anything about these traditions can claim that the experiences of shamanism are necessarily, in any way, pathological.

Vince: That's great to see that there's more research being done into the differences there, because I get the sense, for the uninformed, it seems, like maybe they're all just the same thing.

Roger: And that was a very common assumption, I'm glad you mentioned that. Yes, that was one other thing that happened, and you still hear occasionally in the popular culture maybe, even in the academic culture, though, fairly rarely, I think, that all these practices are just different roads up the mountain and they're all pretty much...induce pretty much the same experiences, states of consciousness. But you really can't maintain that claim once you look closely at the experiences and states of consciousness, and even stages of development that these different practices cultivate.

Vince: Interesting. And given that you're saying there's some pretty clear differences, I'm wondering if there are certain things that, for instance, contemporary Buddhist communities or practitioners could learn from the shamanistic traditions, and if that's something that you've thought much about?

Roger: Well, I think, it probably depends on the individual Buddhist practitioner. Some people are drawn to explore other traditions and to make comparisons, others are very content just to dive into their own tradition. I think, there can be a richness in and gift in appreciating other traditions and practices. And one of the positive things about shamanism is that with the use of things like drumming with a good guide, one can usually get a taste of shamanic experiences very rapidly, much more rapidly than with many meditative practices. So, if someone's interested, and they can find a good shamanic teacher, and for those who are interested, you might want to look up on the web The Foundation for Shamanic Studies, which is a foundation founded by Dr. Michael Harner who is an anthropologist and one of the world's most experienced shamanic researchers and practitioners and teachers.

You can find teachers who will be able to give you a taste of this tradition. And I think there's often a complementary value that comes from exposure to other practices, that is, there's some experiences, insights and observations that emerge from doing other practices that can be very nicely complementary. For some people, also, it can get a little confusing, being exposed to other traditions and they prefer just to stay with the one. So I think individuals have to listen very deeply to their own inner guidance and what feels right for them.

Vince: Nice. Thank you. And I guess just as a way to wrap up, is there anything that you'd want to say or anything that feels relevant to a group of listeners who may identify as Buddhist Geeks?

Roger: [Laughs] Well, Buddhist Geeks, I love that phrase by the way, and I'm just delighted to know of what you're doing and that you're putting this information out on the Web and making it available to people.

Yes, something does come to mind and that is that we're in a unique time in history and we have a unique opportunity as well as unique challenges. This is the first time that Buddhism has not only crossed cultures, but has crossed eras. As Buddhism moved, for example, from India to Tibet to China to Japan across cultures in the past, but in coming to the West, it's also transitioning across eras. It's moving from an agricultural era to a post-modern era. And as such, there's enormous sensitivity that's needed to the different worldviews and understandings and assumptions that Westerners have as opposed to people from Oriental cultures, for example.

So, we are being called to look at the Buddhist tradition and to assess it in the light of contemporary knowledge and science and technology, and to differentiate between, for example, the wonderful trends, rational practices that Buddhism contains, the exquisite rational philosophy, and the pre-rational magic and myth, also sometimes associated with it. That's a distinction that hasn't necessarily been made before. So, that's one thing. And it's an example of the fact that when Buddhism was migrated into a new culture, in each and every case, it has transformed the culture, Buddhism itself is also being transformed. So, we're called as contemporary Buddhist practitioners, as Buddhist geeks, to both do the practices and absorb the wisdom, but also to bring a discerning, contemporary, post-modern eye and discernment to the tradition so

that we can take what is most valuable and appropriate for our culture and time, and leave what isn't so helpful. So, that's the one thing.

The second thing that we're called to do is to communicate these practices and teachings through contemporary means, and this is exactly what you're doing with Buddhist Geeks. That is, to make use of contemporary media as a way of making these practices and ideas available to the largest possible community, and one of the main reasons I'm so delighted about what you're doing. Then there's the third challenge that we face and the third opportunity, and that is, we not only have all the world's spiritual traditions available as a unique feature of our time but, in addition, we face a unique challenge to our planet. We, really, for the first time in history, are at a time when we're not only facing enormous social and global challenges but almost all of them in human cost. Which means that, what we call our global problems are actually global symptoms. They're symptoms and expressions of our own individual and collective pathologies and immaturities.

And, yet, most of the remedial actions that are being taken to work with things like pollution or over-population or global warming or nuclear weapons, are military, economic, and political. So, they don't really get at the psychological and spiritual roots from which our global crises have emerged. Yet, if we're going to survive or if we're going to handle these problems, if we're going to keep the world as a livable eco-system, we're going to have not only solve the external problems. We're going to have to heal the internal forces and neuroses within us, between us, which created it in the first place, and that's where Buddhism comes in. It has the potential for giving us practices to cultivate qualities like love and compassion and sensitivity and clarity that we, as individuals and as a society and a species, desperately need.

So, we are at this enormously pivotal time in human history where we desperately need what Buddhism and other contemplative practices have to offer us. And we are called as individuals and as a spiritual community to develop the skillful means that makes optimal use of contemporary technology and information to respond as well as we can both individually and collectively to these crises.