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Dawn Engle:

“The Dalai Lama -- Scientist” Premieres at the Venice International Film Festival



27-09-2019

Dawn Engle: The Dalai Lama and Tibetan Buddhism in the Test of Science

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Dawn Engle, Director of the documentary *The Dalai Lama, Scientist*, premiered in Venice during the Cinema Festival, addresses a little-known aspect of the Dalai Lama. The film traces, with unpublished archive documents, his interest in science since his childhood. And we see him, later, debate with scientists - Paul Ekman, psychology, Richard Davidson, neuroscience, Francisco Varela, Nobel Prize winner Steven Chu and specialists in quantum physics - at the meetings in Dharamsala and Mind and Life Institute, where he analyzes the field of possibilities between Buddhist and Western sciences. These extraordinary exchanges led to the creation of new practices at the crossroads between Buddhist ancestral knowledge and cutting-edge scientific research, including the introduction of the notion of empathy in the medical field of neuroscience,

Dawn Engle and her husband Ivan Suvanjiëff, producer of the movie and *Nobel Legacy Film Series*, founded PeaceJam, an organization that brings together young people with innovative projects to 14 Nobel Prize winners, including Rigoberta Manchu, Desmond Tutu and the Dalai Lama, one of the first founding members. The one-year program runs in 40 countries and develops projects for peace related to the specificity of each Nobel Prize, dealing with racism, women's rights, but also with empathy, compassion and climate change with the Dalai Lama. "For more than thirty years, I have spent time with Western scientists," says the Dalai Lama. "In thinking about it, I sometimes think that I am half a Buddhist monk and the other half a scientist." We discover in *The Dalai Lama, Scientist* the extraordinary initiatives launched by the Dalai Lama, a rare interlocutor between Eastern and Western knowledge.

Why did you decide to make a film about the Dalai Lama?

Ivan, my husband, had the idea of creating PeaceJam, an organization that connects Nobel Prize winners with young people to develop innovative projects in their communities. The Dalai Lama, a founding member of PeaceJam, endorsed the idea of a documentary about him, saying, "But not only with me." And Ivan proposed: "With all the footage we have on our fourteen Nobel Prize Laureates, let's make a series of documentaries about them." Martin Scorsese's film Kundun did exist, but there was nothing about the Dalai Lama's interest in science. So we decided to make a documentary in which he tackles this subject, starting from his childhood.

Has the Dalai Lama been open to sharing his childhood memories?

He was very approachable and liked to talk about it. He is passionate about technology and said that if he had not become the Dalai Lama, he would have been an engineer or an electrician! And I wanted to tell his story in his own words, starting with his childhood, where we see this little boy, the future Dalai Lama, dismantle his toys, and discover his analytical mind from an early age.

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What is your relationship with the Dalai Lama?

I was an economist in the US Congress; I participated in legislation for the defense of human rights in Tibet and was part of the Colorado Support Group for Tibet. So I was very involved in helping Tibet. I met the Dalai Lama thirty years ago at the first meeting of the International Campaign for Tibet in Dharamshala, India.

During their talks with the Dalai Lama, the scientific experts are surprised by his observations, his curiosity and his ease in discussing these sharp topics. Did they change their minds at the end of this film and think differently today?

Each of the scientists present in the documentary was impacted by his exchange with the Dalai Lama, and the questions he asked them changed their directions of research. Knowledge gained from the field of Buddhist science has indeed changed some Western scientific concepts. By participating in the conferences of the Mind and Life Institute, I understood that there is on one side the faith and the Buddhist philosophy, and on the other a very elaborate Buddhist science. This interaction between Western and Buddhist sciences that we show in the film is indeed born from meeting with the Dalai Lama, who has a unique personality in the religious world. In fact, at the beginning of the Mind and Life conference cycle, some scientists refused to participate in the dialogue with him for fear of losing their credibility.

We discover his adaptability to synthesize information of all types, especially when he evokes "analytical meditation" in response to a psychologist, and stating that "Western psychology is at the kindergarten level, versus Buddhist psychology." So his interest is in all aspects of science?

The Dalai Lama is extraordinary in his openness to everyone, and in his way of making you think with him and trigger a common thought. A rare gift! He is very familiar with the modern world and developments in the field of neuroscience; he has created a new generation of scientists by encouraging the creation of the field of contemplative neuroscience, as well as a new generation of scientific Buddhist monks and nuns for collaboration with them in many fields of science, which will make a genuine contribution for the good of humanity. . So we really need to hear his salutary message in this difficult moment in which we find ourselves today.

In the United States, where there are so many "spiritual" currents, including the creationist movement, which only accepts the idea of creating the world as a divine source, your documentary shows the rational aspect of applied Buddhist philosophy. to life and the world today: what kind of philosophical approach did you intend to put forward?

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By launching this program of scientific studies for monks in American universities, and with the appearance of a new generation of Buddhist monks, the Dalai Lama creates an innovative teaching of Buddhism. What do you think ?

Indeed, in deciding to include science in the monastic curriculum, he has made an extraordinary change. It is now possible to focus on a science curriculum, an option approved by the monastery directors and Geshe elders. He managed to get everyone to accept his project, without ever having imposed it. The program for the monks of Emory University in Atlanta trains them to become science teachers in the monasteries, which is totally new. There is also the SEE program (Social, Emotional and Ethical Learning) and Contemplative Neuroscience. But it is not just about pure research, the Dalai Lama insists that research should lead to new projects and to action.

So this is not just an interest in the debate, but an activist approach?

Indeed: he said: "Enough of discussions, let's take action!" This film is a tool for people to discover the bridge between western science and Buddhist knowledge. And even if you do not know Buddhism or science, you will learn something. As a non-Buddhist economist, I learned a lot. Our wish is to spread the Dalai Lama's call to action through these joint initiatives. For him, science represents a solution to problems, in a climate of trust and collaboration. So let's create our future together, by uniting Buddhist and Western scientific knowledge, a wonderful way to bring the world together.

The film will be released on December 10 (the 30th Anniversary of the Dalai Lama receiving the Nobel Peace Prize) on Google Play as a special feature, and then on iTunes, Amazon Prime, Vimeo, YouTube, Vudu, and many other streaming platforms worldwide.