

Excerpt from Philip D. Clayton, Interview with Francisco Varela, August 9, 2000

PDC: In this section of the interview, I've been asking the other scientists about their work at integrating their religious belief with their scientific work, but it's clear to me that I don't even need to pose that question, because the integration has been a part of your reflection from the very beginning. Have I understood correctly?

FV: Absolutely. The only little footnote I would add to that is that because of the misunderstanding that can come up, I rarely use the word religion. Religion is so related to monotheistic revealed religion, and in some way or another the presence of a God. To me, Buddhism is much more of a pragmatic, human philosophy or way of life and action that has a strong spiritual dimension. Spiritual in that sense for me is a little more broad than religion, which is one way of approaching the spiritual quest. Other than that proviso, I do agree with what you said. The other thing I try to do to bring further integration other than in my own work and thinking is these encounters we have been having with His Holiness the Dalai Lama.

PDC: I have also asked scientists about the effort at a more personal or experiential level to bring together a spiritual practice like meditation with what it is to do work in a lab, to do theoretical work. Are there any ways in which the practice of meditation assists you in empirical or theoretical work, or have your scientific breakthroughs added to the practice of meditation?

FV: Well, it does go both ways, doesn't it? I think that my scientific work and being a scientist in general definitely helps in the journey in my case, in Buddhism, to spiritual avenues, simply because we are intelligent beings, and it helps to understand things. When you understand something better, it draws your commitment and your engagement further than if you are doing it with some kind of blind faith or blind belief. I'm finding in Buddhism that it is always strongly emphasized. Don't take for granted inquiry. Test. That is clearly the case and my work has been tremendously helpful.

On the other side I would say that engaging in the practice of meditation as it is cultivated in the Buddhist path, which has such an enormous extended sense of this idea that we discussed before in scientific terms - that I am nothing but a node in a network. My mind is not a separate thing, so there is no such thing as "my" meditation. In Buddhism the practice of meditation is put always in the context of universal ethics, of understanding the need and the suffering of all sentient beings around us.

In my scientific work, this kind of practice has taught me in two very specific ways. One is that the practice of meditation makes you a little more intelligent. You are not so distracted with all of this chitchat, like when something crosses your mind and you are unable to be present in what you are doing. Mindfulness is tremendously useful for everything one does. In particular, when you are in the lab, or you are dealing with somebody or discussing a paper or writing a text, the fact of having one pointed concentration is a fantastic tool. That makes the work in the lab much more pleasant, because it is focused, it is less dispersed; there is a sense of relaxedness and at the same time of focus. I'd really like to cultivate that in the ambiance of the lab without asking anybody to meditate, but just to bring that sense of focus and relaxed attention to what

we are doing. Young people are particularly sensitive to that. Inevitably after a month or two in the lab, the question comes up and they say, "Wow, it's really nice to work here." It is something quite noticeable. It is of course dependent upon my own limitations, but to the extent that I can, I try to give the lab that atmosphere.

The second level is never to lose sight of why we are doing this. Is it for our exclusive personal fame and glory, or some kind of ego trip that will make my mom happy? Or is it more the sense of following the wonderment that the universe brings with it and life brings with it?

At the same time, within that wonderment there is so much going on around us with people. All kinds of difficulties and all kinds of needs and the world in such necessity - that is the motivation to constantly keep at hand. That is a much tougher one and I try to work every day to never forget what we are doing this for. What are we trying to contribute to the world? In that sense it does bring those elements, and I really delight in both of them.

PDC: We must bring our conversation to a close, but I have to ask you what the response is within the scientific community and from colleagues to this integration which is so natural and deep for you between spiritual pursuit and scientific pursuit. I imagine that colleagues would respond very differently to your describing a section of the enacted view or of information biology as a research program and describing this broader perspective that has been a part of our conversation.

FV: There are all kinds of people. And you never talk the same way depending on the audience. When I am invited to a very standard convention or group of scientists where I give a seminar to an audience like that, I just stay within what is the consensual rule. When it goes beyond that, I have no problem being open about it. It really varies. Let me just tell you a little anecdote and you will get a sense of what I'm trying to say. When I wrote that book called *The Embodied Mind*, it uses the anchoring of human experience of phenomenology and of Buddhism, because at the time I was much less comfortable with my phenomenological understanding. I'm writing another book right now which is much more phenomenologically based. You will not be surprised that the title is *Why the Mind Is Not in the Head*. At any rate, when I wrote *The Embodied Mind*, and it was to me like coming out of the closet, putting my Buddhist interests out into the world. I said to myself, "You've got tenure. What have you got to lose? You are settled, there is no problem." So, I decided to go ahead. I was sure that I was going to be crucified. But I was not only not crucified, we have all kinds of reviews, almost all of them extremely positive by people like Dan Dennett, saying this is a wonderful book. He says, maybe this Buddhism is not really important, but nevertheless ...

PDC: Well, that is fascinating. I don't know how this could be, because he is clearly a materialist in his approach and you are not.

FV: He is, but he appreciated the way in which the argument was presented. Not that he was agreeing with it. He was saying that this is a book from which we can learn something. It was very positive and many other reviews were like that.

PDC: I have to say I really don't understand the positive response from people whose materialism is very foreign to what you have been telling me.

FV: (Laughs). The review by Dennett appeared in the *New Scientist* and it's very interesting, because it is a review where he reviewed simultaneously *Embodied Mind* and Edelman's book, *Bright Air, Brilliant Fire*. He destroys Edelman. It is worth reading. But what my story was coming to was that I started to receive all kinds of letters and e-mails from people. Typically, I would get a phone call from somebody saying, " Please Francisco, I read your book and it was very interesting and I like that enacted thing." Then a little pause at the end of the conversation, then, "And by the way, how do you meditate? (Laughs). You would be amazed at the numbers of people who are hidden, fascinated by this perspective of a secular spirituality. Since they don't have any particular belief, the idea of working with their own experience in their minds is very widely present, and in this vocation, it just opens up.

PDC: So, you've tapped a deep root of interest.

FV: I am totally convinced that within scientists, this is more and more the norm. Very few of them dare come out of the closet.

PDC: Except if people like yourself; whose scientific work is widely recognized as important, are willing to come out of the closet, and be open about it, a type of secular spirituality, it somehow makes it more permissible. FV: I would hope so.

PD C: I would hope that would be one of the results of your participation in the Science and the Spiritual Quest Project, that many scientists could be exposed to the integration that you practice.

FV: I will do my best.

PDC: I think that is a good place for us to stop, and I'd like to thank you for taking the time to speak to me today.

FV: Thank you. This was wonderful and I thank you for organizing these meetings. It looks like it is going to be quite fascinating. I'm really looking forward to this.

Transcribed by Cathy Thompson

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From "Science and the Spiritual Quest II" The Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences. Workshops December 7-10, 2000, NY, and May 21-24, 2001, Paris.