How do you understand the relationship(s) between science and your religious secular tradition? - Prof. Francisca Cho, Ph.D., Buddhist

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From my perspective, the distinction between science and religion is the result of relatively recent history that's located in Western European and American civilization. I would say going back to the 19th century, when evolutionary science created the perception of tensions, if not outright conflict between biblical views of creation and human existence, in contrast to what evolutionary science had to say. So, looking at this particular episode from the perspective of a non-Western culture, a Buddhist one, in my case, the idea of a distinction between religion and science, let alone a tension or problem between them, is something that's limited to a particular culture, as opposed to a naturally existing division or even separate realms of activity. (01:39) I think the comparison and contrast to the situation between the science of human origins, and again, biblical religion, in contradistinction to Buddhism might be a useful way of proceeding. So, I think there are two specific points of tension between, say, Christianity and evolutionary science, the first having to do with the special-ness of human beings. From the Buddhist point of view, Buddhists also think of human beings as very special, relative to other species. I think that is held in common with Christianity, but the reasons for that I think differ in interesting ways. The reason why human existence is special is because human beings have the capacity to attain liberation or Buddhist enlightenment. Whereas animal existence, I suppose, is driven more by instinctual drives, as opposed to the level of consciousness and will necessary to strive for liberation, and perhaps many Buddhists view animal existence as almost a form of punishment for past misdeeds, and therefore, they're not capable of attaining liberation. (03:06) So, that tension is perhaps also existent in the Buddhist view of human existence, which might conflict with the science of human origins, which suggests that there's a closeness, a greater affinity between human and animal species. So, what's interesting is the reason for special-ness of human existence, according to Buddhist thinking, is that it so easily could be otherwise. In other words, in the Buddhist worldview, we could easily be an animal in the past life or in the next life. So, this idea of species change is one that's readily accepted. And given the ease with which we can be one form of life or another, being born a human is special because it so easily could have been otherwise. And being
human allows you, again, that capacity, that potential for liberation. (04:19) I would say the second point of tension between biblical religion and the science of human origins has to do with timescale, the idea of vast timescales in which speciation or the evolution of species creates mutations from one species to another, as opposed to all species being created in its final form at the beginning point of time. In that respect, there's really no tension with the Buddhist view of time, because actually, in Buddhist cosmology, its conception of time is so vastly large, it actually dwarfs the scientific idea that the universe is roughly 15 billion years old. So, in Buddhist cosmology, we have vastly larger stretches of time, in which it's understood that change and evolution of sort, certainly not Darwinian evolution as that's understood by scientists today. But nevertheless, change and transmutations of life forms are naturally occurring events. So, to sum up, in Buddhist thinking, human existence is very special, but based on this view that we are very much akin to other life forms, all sentient life forms, as opposed to distinctly separate in some ontological or innate sense. (06:06) I think the science of evolution and of human origins presents opportunities to certainly converge with Buddhist views about the sanctity or the equality of all sentient life. I think one advantage of modern science is that it seems to show us that our kin in the animal world also have emotions, perhaps their life forms entail more than pure instinctual drives, that animals can also play and enjoy themselves and have aesthetic experiences, in a sense. So, I think there's an opportunity to create a greater sense of unity amongst all living beings. I believe Buddhism is also very much of a piece with Christian theologians who are worried that the science of human origins can, and I think is sometimes used to try to degrade the nature of human existence as being merely material or animalistic. So, it goes both ways, and I think there's a danger there. I think we can enoble all of sentient life together or degrade all of sentient life, including human life, together, once that message of unity has been deployed. So, that's where I would see an opportunity, as well as a danger that we should try to veer away from.