

Why Are You Crying, Mama?

by

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A Historical Romance Novel

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*Dedicated to my Parents, Brother, Sisters,
my wife and our daughters*

CHAPTER 1

(7th May 1934 – Monday – 8 p.m.)

The place was Florenville, Belgium.

“Why are you crying, Mama?”

The small girl’s faint voice was filled with sorrow. She meekly stood at the door of a living room, quite spacious, luxuriously decorated, and dimly lit. The woman quickly dried the tears on her cheeks and turned toward the little girl.

“Oh, my dear, I didn’t know you were there. Come hug me.”

The girl was about six years old and biracial, African-Caucasian; she seemed to have slightly more prominent African features than Caucasian. She went to her mother, who was sitting on a large sofa. Her mother, who held a book in her hand, put it on a nearby table, stretched out her arms, and took the child tenderly to her side. Outside it was not yet fully dark. The clock on the wall read nine o’clock.

The woman was in her mid-twenties and Caucasian. In a soft voice, she asked her child, “How often do you see me crying, darling?”

“Quite often. Whenever I see you crying, I am so sad, Mama.”

“My child, I’ll have to repeat what I’ve often told you whenever you asked me this question: Women are very odd beings. Women are very odd beings. They cry for many reasons. They cry when they are happy; they cry when they are sad; they cry when they reminisce about old memories, good or bad; they cry when they see beautiful things; sometimes, they cry without even knowing why.”

“Really?”

“Yes, you will know when you grow up and become a woman.”

“But why are you crying right now, Mama?”

“I’m crying right now because I’m so happy to have a lovely and intelligent daughter like you.”

“I don’t believe I’m intelligent and lovely. All the boys and girls I meet on the streets call out, ‘Hey, you ugly, stupid nigger.’”

“Don’t take them seriously. They’re just children like you.”

“Even many adults call me the same thing.”

“Oh really? I’m so sad to hear that. But try to be strong, okay?”

“That’s what I’ve been trying to do for years. I have secretly cried alone many times because I don’t want to make you sad with my own sorrow.”

Upon hearing these words, the woman could barely contain her emotions. With a trembling voice, she said, “I’ve always thought so, my child, but I never dared to ask you.”

Both of them sobbed for some minutes. Then, the child spoke with a broken voice. “Mama, you said you were crying out of happiness because you’ve got a lovely and intelligent daughter like me. Would you still cry with happiness if I were an ugly, stupid child?”

The woman was quite surprised and saddened by the child's unexpected question. She answered with an effort, “Even then, I’d still cry out of happiness, my child.”

The woman was interrupted by her daughter. “I don’t believe that. You just said you’re crying out of happiness because I’m a lovely and intelligent child, but that means you’d not cry out of happiness if I were ugly and stupid.”

Tears were streaming down the woman's face.

“Even then, I’d still love you because you’re mine. Beauty and ugliness are superficial things. For example, when you see a stranger, you might think they are beautiful or handsome at first glance. But if they said or did something awful to you, you wouldn’t find them beautiful or handsome anymore. In the same way, you might find a stranger ugly at first glance, but if he is kind to you and does nice things for you, you’d find him ugly no more, and you’d like and love him. To you, he could become the most handsome guy. The most handsome or beautiful guy in the world is the one who likes you, who loves you, who cares for you and who helps you when you’re in need.”

“Do you really mean it, Mama?”

“Yes, I really mean it. But you’ll find out that it’s true when you grow up and have more experience in the world. Sadly, countless people leave the world without ever having learned this priceless lesson. Just one example: If I saw your papa on the street somewhere, I wouldn’t find him handsome or attractive, although he’s not ugly. He

was not the type I'd fall in love with quickly. If he had not saved my life, I'd have been hit by a car and most likely killed on the spot, or I could have been handicapped my whole life. He not only saved my life, but he's so kind and warm that he became one of the most handsome guys in the world to me. And I wonder if my love for him is also partly the result of my feelings of pity for his hard life. Some people say that if you love someone out of sympathy, it's much stronger than a love that results from physical beauty or attraction."

The child was attentively listening to what her mother was telling her.

"Mama, is there anything about him that you don't like – at least sometimes?"

"Before I met your papa, I always dreamed of having someone humorous and exciting as my husband. Sometimes, I find him a little bit boring because he rarely says 'No' to whatever I do or say. But then I've slowly become used to his behavior. His whole life, he has had to fight all kinds of hardship, like racial discrimination and poverty, so he always says he needs peace as much as possible. And he feels very insecure."

"Mama, what does that mean – to feel insecure?"

"He's not sure whether I truly love him deep in my heart. He sometimes thinks I pretend to love him simply out of gratitude for saving my life. And he's worried about whether our marriage will last, and so on. But over time, he's become more convinced that my love for him is real."

"Mama, you and Papa used to tell me some years ago how he saved your life, but you said you'd tell me about it more in detail when I was a little bit older. Would you tell me about it now?"

"Yes, we did promise you that every time you asked us. I think we can tell you about it soon. In the past, we've hidden many secrets from you because we didn't want to burden you with problems that we were – and still are – confronted with."

"Mama, when is Papa coming back from Paris?"

"Tomorrow evening, around six o'clock. We'll pick him up at the station. Now, it's getting late. Let's go to bed, okay?"

"Mama, I'm happy you're going to tell me about you and Papa."

“We won’t exactly *tell* you about it, but I’ve written our life story up to now as a novel, and I’m going to keep on writing it as we go on living. So far, I’ve written seven chapters. It’s something like an autobiographical novel. I’ll read these chapters aloud to you, okay? But let’s go to bed now. Good night, my dear.”

“Good night, Mama. I’m already very excited about it.”

The next evening, Jane, the mother, and Jennifer, the young girl, went to pick John, the father, up at the train station. After dinner, Jane, Jennifer, and John were comfortably sitting together on two sofas around a table in the same spacious living room where Jane and Jennifer had sat the previous night. John was a stoutly built, medium-sized man, about 170 centimeters, just a few centimeters taller than Jane, in his late twenties. Jennifer was the right height for her age. The clock on the wall read eight o’clock sharp.

“Mama, yesterday evening, you promised to read me the seven chapters of the novel that you’ve started writing about your meeting Papa and how you got married. I’ve been thinking about it the whole day, and I’m very excited to hear it. If possible, could you please read it now?”

“Yes, I promised I would do that . . .”

Jennifer was curious. “Mama, what will you call it?”

“I don’t know yet. I’m thinking about three titles. Maybe I’ll call it *Why Are You Crying, Mama?* Because it’s the question that you ask me most. Or simply *Jane* – my first name. Or perhaps another thing you often say to me: *Whenever I See You Crying, I’m So Sad, Mama.* I’ll probably let you choose, okay? Which one do you like most at this moment?”

“I like the first one: *Why Are You Crying, Mama?* But I don’t know why.”

“Let’s discuss it when I finish the whole manuscript, okay? What happened yesterday and today between us in this room will become Chapter 1. Now, though, I’m going to read chapters 2 to 7. Listen!”

CHAPTER 2

(24th December 1926 – Friday)

On the evening of 24th December 1926, a Friday, the time was about ten o'clock. The whole town of Bastogne was well lit with Christmas decorations; it was covered with thick snow and extremely cold. The main streets were full of pedestrians, and the mood was very joyous. Church bells were ringing out through the town. Jane was in town with her mother and a couple of her cousins to spend Christmas with their maternal grandparents.

They were on their way to the Church of St. Francis, on the Avenue de la Gare. The rest, all except Jane, had already crossed the road, but when she started to cross the street at the junction of Avenue de la Gare and Rue de Neufchateau, someone suddenly grasped her from behind and swept her forcefully aside. She was unsure of what had happened. Then she saw a young black man, and now she realized that he was the one who had swept her aside. What she did not see was that an old man had been driving relatively fast toward them, and when he'd tried to turn to the left, he'd lost control of the car and careened toward her. Jane did not see this, as she was looking in the opposite direction. If the young black man had not acted at the last moment, she could have been hit from behind and perhaps killed on the spot. When she realized this, she was overcome by shock. Trembling and looking at the young man, she could barely utter a single word.

"Hello!" the young black man greeted her in English. "Hello, my name is John. Good evening."

She also replied in English, still shaking from shock. "Hi. Good evening, John. I'm Jane. Oh John, I don't know how to thank you. If you hadn't saved me, I'd be dead now, or at least severely injured."

"Good evening, Jane. It's God and not me who has saved you. So please, thank God and not me."

"But I only see you. So, for me, you're the one who saved my life."

As people started to gather around them, John looked worried. “Jane, I’m sorry. I’m rather in a hurry. So goodbye and good luck.”

“John, could you at least give me your address so I can contact you?”

“I’m an American visiting this country. I’m living in Brussels at the moment. I cannot give you my address now.”

“Why not, John?”

“I simply can’t. There’s a reason, Jane.”

“I see. Okay, then. At least take my card. Please contact me as soon as possible, okay? Goodbye and take care. Thank you so much once again. I’ll think of you, and I hope we’ll meet again someday.”

“Goodbye and good luck, Jane. May God bless you.”

John hastily took Jane’s card and disappeared into the crowd. Jane was upset and shedding tears. Many people were helping the elderly driver. Jane’s mother and cousins hurriedly came back to comfort her, and then in a few moments, they were all heading toward the church. After the worship service, they all went to Jane and her cousins’ grandparents’ home. Jane could not sleep the whole night for she was thinking about what had happened all night. Her mind dwelt in particular upon her young black rescuer, and she wondered whether she would ever meet him again. The family stayed there until the New Year and went home in the first week of 1927.

CHAPTER 3

(March–June 1927)

Jane thought about John day in and day out and waited for a phone call that never came. She often waited for the postman, too, and when he came, she frantically checked her mail. Three months had passed, and nothing had happened; she became restless and depressed. Whenever those who knew the story and her obsession with him wanted to know why she felt like that, she told them that she would like to thank him more profusely and that she wanted to know a little more about his life and so on.

On 20th March, she decided to revisit the town where the accident had happened. She stayed with her maternal grandparents again. Every day, she went into the town center around eleven o'clock in the morning and remained in the vicinity until three or four o'clock in the afternoon, hanging around near the spot where the accident took place, hoping that perhaps her rescuer might revisit it. She also went out in the late evenings and observed passersby around the same site. Every time she saw black people, she ran after them and asked them if they knew a black American named John in Brussels. But as her search for him proved fruitless, she returned to her hometown after three weeks on the 21st April - sad, exhausted, and depressed.

She was so obsessed with John that she could not concentrate on her work at home. Her parents, grandparents on both sides, and close friends and relatives tried to console and persuade her in many different ways to forget about him, saying that he must have a good reason for not contacting her. But she counter-argued that it could be that he had lost her card and that she wanted to know the reason. Her obsession was so intense that her relatives began to suspect that her motive might be more than just gratitude. So her parents advised her to go to Brussels and continue her search for him there. She thought she would never find peace in her life if she didn't find him, so she was determined to continue her quest, no matter how long it might take until every effort had been exhausted.

After two weeks of rest at home, she went to Brussels by car on 4th June and stayed with Maria, her mother's youngest sister, who lived in the city center. Jane decided to stay for at least a couple of weeks. On the day of her departure, her parents and cousins gathered to say goodbye to her. Just before she left, her mother said, "Jane, I wish you the best of luck in your search for him. If he is just a normal human being and not an angel, you'll surely find him. By the way, the other day, one of your aunts said she thought you might have fallen in love with him, at least unconsciously. Although you don't believe in God, if I were you, I'd pray to him anyway. I'll pray for you every day, darling. Take care, and good luck and goodbye."

"Mama, I don't think I've fallen in love with him. Although he's not ugly, he's not the type with whom I could fall in love. And our encounter was so brief. Thank you so much, Mama, Papa, and all of you for giving me support and strength during the last few months. I'll inform you immediately if I find him again."

They hugged and parted. Jane drove straight to Brussels. Maria pitied her so much that she promised to help her in her search. As she had done in Bastogne, Jane left her aunt's apartment every day at different times and walked around or hung about, observing all the black people she came across. Maria accompanied her several times, and they asked nearly every black man and woman they met on the street if they knew a black American named John. Days had come and gone, but nothing happened. Jane had already spent four weeks in Brussels. She was sad and exhausted, both physically and mentally. So she finally decided to go home. But she first wanted to go to Barbara's birthday party at the well-known restaurant *Chez Leon*, located at Rue des Bouchers 18, not far from Maria's apartment. Jane and Barbara studied economics together at the Free University of Brussels. There were about thirty invitees.

Jane and Maria arrived at the restaurant at about eight o'clock. Nearly all the other guests had already arrived, and they introduced themselves to each other. After they had finished the luxurious dinner at around ten o'clock, people formed groups here and there and start-

ed making small talk. Jane and her aunt chatted with some guests. At around half past eleven, Jane, Maria, and a few other guests prepared to go home and said goodbye to those around them. Then, Jane excused herself from the group and went to the toilet. On her way, she inadvertently peeked into the kitchen through a half-open door, and there, to her great surprise and excitement, she saw John washing the dishes. She shouted out, “Hi John!”

John looked back at her blankly, perplexed, and said nothing.

Jane continued, “It’s me, Jane! I’m the one you rescued on Christmas Eve! Don’t you remember me?”

John recognized her now and was very excited too. He rushed to her and shook hands with her and said, “Hi Jane, now I recognize you. Oh, how nice it is to see you again so unexpectedly.”

“Oh John, how happy I am to see you again.” She could only utter these few words and was so excited that she suddenly hugged him and, at the same time, burst into tears. John also hugged her back. Then, with great effort, she said through her tears, “Oh John, I’ve been looking for you everywhere, in Bastogne and here in this city, for several weeks. You don’t know how happy I am!”

John’s eyes were also full of tears. After a short while, John freed her from his arms and said, “Yes, I’m also so happy to see you again, Jane.”

Those in the kitchen just stared at them without having any idea what was happening between the pair. Jane looked deep into his face, still tightly holding his hands, and said, “John, I have waited for a call or a letter every day since the accident. Why didn’t you contact me?”

“Jane, I wanted to, but I’ve overstayed my visa and am working illegally in restaurant kitchens, trying to earn money for my return journey.”

On hearing these words, Jane once again burst into tears. “John, why didn’t you contact me and tell me about it? I could have helped you. I thought you might have lost my card, and I didn’t know where to look for you.”

“I’m so happy to hear your kind words. Thank you so much for your willingness to help me, Jane. But I think I can manage on my own.”

“John, I’m going back home tomorrow. I’ve got many things to do, so I cannot stay here longer. Can you come with me? My parents and other relatives would be very pleased to see you. You can stay with us as long as you like.”

“Thank you so much for your kindness and generosity, but I can’t do that. I have to work for at least two more weeks in this place. Then I could probably visit you for a few days. But I must avoid traveling as much as possible because I could get caught at any time by the police for overstaying.”

“Would it be possible for the restaurant owner to find someone to take your place now?”

“No, I don’t think so. And I can’t leave my aunt and uncle so suddenly. I’m living with them, and they’re not feeling well at the moment.”

“Oh, I see. Yes, I understand your precarious situation. Should I come back here and pick you up and drive you to my home?”

“No, I don’t think you’ll need to. Three good friends of mine are going in your direction soon, and I could ask them to take me with them and drop me at your place. If that doesn’t work, I’ll take the risk and come by train.”

“Are your friends black or white?”

“They’re white. Two are Americans, and one is Belgian.”

“Do they know that you’ve overstayed your visa?”

“Yes, they know about it. But traveling with whites is much safer than traveling alone or with other blacks.”

“Aren’t they racist?”

“They were somewhat racist when we met. But I won their friendship with my patience, humility, forgiveness, and friendliness.”

“That’s very interesting ... All right, then. But if you’d prefer me to come and pick you up for any reason, please just let me know, okay?”

“Yes, I’ll do that.”

“Here’s my card again. Please call me, and we’ll arrange your visit. Well, it’s rather late, so we’ll have to leave now.”

Jane then introduced John to Maria. Observing the pair, Maria silently shed tears of happiness. Jane reached into her purse and took out some money and handed it to John.

“John, here are a few hundred francs for your train ticket if you have to come by train, and the rest is for your other needs.”

John refused to take the money at first, saying that it was too much. But Jane insisted that he accept it. Tears streaming down her cheeks, she hugged him affectionately once again and said goodbye, and then hurried out of the kitchen with Maria. His eyes were also full of tears.

CHAPTER 19

(1st October 1939 – Sunday)

Germany invaded Poland on 1st September; France, Great Britain, Australia and New Zealand declared war on Germany on 3rd September; the British forces moved to the Belgian border on 3rd September, anticipating a German invasion. Canada declared war on Germany on 10th September; Russia invaded Poland on 17th September; Warsaw surrendered on 27th September. The Polish government went into exile. Poland was divided between the Germans and the Soviets on 29th September.

It was nine o'clock on Saturday morning. Jane was preparing breakfast in the kitchen and Sarah was playing in the kitchen with her toys. When Jane had breakfast ready, she called, "Jennifer ... Jennifer? Come. Breakfast is ready."

There was no sign of Jennifer. Jane called a bit louder. "Jennifer ... Jennifer. Come. Breakfast is ready!"

Still no response, so Jane went to Jennifer's bedroom and knocked on the door. There was no reply. Jane slowly opened the door and looked inside. Everything in the room was in order, but as there was no sign of Jennifer, Jane began to worry. She entered the room and nervously checked every corner. The bed was cold. She then saw an envelope on the table and frantically picked it up. On it was written clearly in large letters: "For My Beloved Mama!" She quickly opened it, and as she read it her hands began to shake and she was overcome with shock and sorrow.

My dearest Mama,

When you find this letter, I might not be in this world anymore. So please don't try to look for me. As you know my situation so well, I won't write at length. I've always pretended to be strong for you, Papa, Oma and Opa and our other relatives because I didn't want to make you sad. But deep in my heart, I was always so sad and so lonely. There were many occasions when I thought I could no longer go

on living, but because all of you were so kind and loving I didn't want to make you sad by departing from you so soon. For this reason alone, I tried to go on living.

When my papa left us, my world broke into pieces. And then, when I began to regain the will to live, my oma and opa left us. I can imagine how sad you'll be when you read this letter. I wish I could be with you and say, "Mama, please don't cry!" I can foresee how much I'd suffer when the war comes to us – and it'll surely come very soon. I've therefore decided to disappear from this world before I'm forced to leave it anyway.

Please convey my deepest gratitude and most heartfelt greetings to Papa, his parents and sister, Oma, Opa, Sarah, Auntie Elizabeth, Uncle David, my cousins, and all our relatives and friends. Please tell them how thankful I always was. If not for their love and care, I'd have left this world a long time ago. Mama, I know that you don't believe in the biblical God, and I fully understand your feelings. I deeply respect you for your noble thinking. I know how lucky I was to have been born among such loving, caring, and protective people as you, Papa, Oma, Opa, other relatives, and friends. But the outside world is cold and heartless and hostile to me.

Please forgive me for making you so sad now. Even if I stayed on till the war came to us, you'd suffer anyway with the hardship I'd have to go through. Mama, I was suffering for myself, for Papa and all black people. And whenever I saw how much you were suffering for us, too, my own suffering became unbearable. So please try to console yourself. I'll be waiting for you in a place where there's no more sorrow and death. We'll meet again there. Please don't cry, Mama! I love you so much, and I'll always love you!

May God bless you until we meet again. Goodbye, Mama!

P.S. Would you please kindly allow me to make a last supplication to you, Mama? Since it'd be of no use to blame the biblical God for having created different skin colors and different levels of intelligence and physical features, would you please think about Jesus' message of love and forgiveness in the four Gospels? As you've long been fas-

cinated by Buddhism, I know that you may become a Buddhist some day and seek your peace of mind in that. But if you did, and if Buddhism doesn't forbid you to believe in Jesus at the same time, would you also try to find solace in him as well? You wouldn't lose anything by doing it. I want to see you again in God's kingdom. But the decision is absolutely up to you, Mama.

As she read the letter, Jane could not control herself any longer and burst into torrential tears. It took hours to calm herself down. Then she began calling Jennifer's cousins and friends one after another, asking them if they knew Jennifer's whereabouts, but nobody knew where she might be. A shockwave spread rapidly among Jane's relatives, friends, and the immediate neighboring communities. Several relatives and friends came to comfort her. Jane then asked her aunts, uncles, and friends for their advice. Some of them advised her to inform the police, but others said she should wait a few days to see whether Jennifer contacted her. So Jane decided to wait for two days before she went to the police. Everyone wondered whether Jennifer had run away or had taken her own life.

Some of Jane's relatives told her that they would look in the local newspapers for any clues. The whole community was in great shock and filled with sorrow. People flocked to Jane's home to comfort her. Catholic priests and Protestant pastors visited her and prayed for her. But she could not find peace of mind. She could not sleep or eat.

As there was no sign of Jennifer after two days, Jane and her relatives decided to inform the police. The police asked Jane various questions about their lives and Jennifer's psychological state, and so on. They wanted to know if Jennifer had ever had a boyfriend and whether any of her clothes or other belongings were missing, and if she had left any addresses or letters other than the one to Jane. Jane told them that a few clothes were missing but she had not found any addresses or letters or notes. She told the police about the young Guatemalan boy whom Jennifer had met on holiday in Paris some years ago and liked very much.

The police wanted to know whether Jennifer and the Guatemalan

boy had ever written to each other. Jane told them that so far as she knew, they had written a couple of times, but since Jennifer could not speak Spanish, she had conducted the correspondence through a friend, who had told Jane that there was nothing romantic in the letters.

The police then wanted to know if Jennifer had ever tried to learn Spanish. Jane replied yes, and that she had a French/Spanish dictionary in which Jennifer had made some notes. The police wanted to know if Jane had any idea how to discover the boy's identity. Jane said no. The police suggested that she come back to them the next day at the same time. They would conduct inquiries within Belgium and then make an analysis.

Jane and a couple of her relatives went back to the police the next day at the same time. The police informed them that there was no further information about Jennifer. They believed that she had most likely not committed suicide but had run away to an unknown destination. Where it could be, they had no idea. They suggested that Jane try to find the Guatemalan boy. On their way home from the police station, one of Jane's female relatives suggested she contact Sister Hanna. The idea struck Jane like a lightning bolt.

"Yes, good idea. It didn't occur to me. I'll call her right away when we get home. Thank you very much."

As soon as they arrived home, Jane rang the number of Sister Hanna's convent, and a female voice came on the other end.

"Hello, good afternoon. I'm Ms. Jeanmart, calling from Florenville. May I speak to Sister Hanna sometime today?"

"Good afternoon. I'm Sister Maria. You're fortunate, Ms. Jeanmart. Sister Hanna is coincidentally right here. I'll pass her the phone."

"Hello, good afternoon, Hanna. It's me, Jane. How are you?"

"Hello, Jane, good afternoon. I'm fine. I suppose you're calling me because of Jennifer?"

Jane was surprised by the question. "Yes, Hanna. How did you know?"

“She wrote me a sorrowful farewell letter and told me that she had also left a similar letter for you.”

“Ah, I see. She visited you twice recently, didn’t she? Did she give you any hint about what she was going to do?”

“I knew that she was suffering very much psychologically. But she didn’t give me any sign at all that she would disappear like this.”

“I’ve been to the police, and the police psychologists thought Jennifer most likely did not take her own life but went away somewhere. Do you have any idea where she might have gone?”

“I’m so sorry, I don’t have any idea. Jennifer mentioned a young boy by the name of Carlos from Spain or somewhere in Latin America a couple of times. That’s all.”

“Hanna, what shall I do now? I’m so sad, it’s burning me up. I feel so helpless. I don’t know what to do. If she had died in a traffic accident or from a disease, I don’t think I would be suffering this much. The police suggested that I try to find out the identity of the boy, but I don’t know how I can do that.”

“Jane, since you don’t believe in the biblical God, and I know that you’re rather fascinated by Buddhism, I can only give you this advice. A couple of days ago, I heard that the Congress of Freethinkers in Brussels had invited a Buddhist monk from Ceylon, who visited England recently on the Buddhist Society’s invitation in London, to come to Brussels for a few weeks to give some lectures. I don’t know if he’s already here or if he’ll even come, given the situation in Europe. But I know the person who organized the event well. I’ll call him and tell him about your predicament. He might be able to arrange a personal audience with the monk. I’ll let you know when I’ve spoken with my friend, okay?”

“Hanna, that’s an excellent idea. Thank you so much. I’ll be waiting to hear. And I wish you all the best, meanwhile.”

Two hours later, Hanna was on the phone again. “Hello Jane, I’ve just spoken to the man I mentioned. His name is Professor Matthew Fleming; he’s a member of the internationally known Belgian School of Buddhist Studies and the Congress of Freethinkers. He’s an amia-

ble guy, about forty years of age, still relatively young, but he and his wife are not yet Buddhists because they can't decide which school would be most suitable for them. So they're still studying the concepts of all the large Buddhist schools. You'll like him immediately. He told me that the monk is temporarily stranded in Belgium due to the sudden outbreak of war. He also said the famous Indologist Professor Etienne Lamotte of the Catholic University of Louvain, who has authored several books on Buddhism, may again come to Brussels in a few days. And he said he'd be able to arrange a personal audience for you with the monk or the Indologist or both. If you would like an audience with the monk, he can set it up for ten o'clock in the morning until eight in the evening the day after tomorrow at his home, where the monk is staying. They had planned for him to give a lecture that evening at the house, but when I told him about you, he changed the plan so that the monk could devote the whole day to you. And those who had planned to attend his evening lecture will go to Matthew's house anyway to listen to your discussion with the monk instead. But if you'd prefer to meet with the Indologist, Matthew will make an appointment for you at a later date."

"Oh Hanna, how kind of you. I have to go to Brussels tomorrow anyway, so it'll be perfect. I'd prefer to meet with the monk since I've never met a Buddhist monk before. I have nothing against the Indologist, but a person who has spent nearly his entire adult life as a monk will probably see things differently from a pure scholar like Professor Lamotte. I'll never forget this favor, and I'll tell you in detail about our discussion. Hopefully, you won't convert to Buddhism if what the monk tells me is enlightening! I'm just joking, Hanna. May God bless you. We'll talk again soon."

"Jane, I've also read many books on Buddhism, but I'm convinced that what I believe in now is right for me. I'm glad that I could do this little thing for you. You can always call me at any time if you need me. And please keep in mind that I share your sorrow. You know that Jennifer was like a daughter to me. Although you aren't religious, I'll always remember you in my prayers. Hopefully, the

monk will be able to give you the peace of mind that you so badly need now. I wish you the best of luck and may God bless you, Jane!”

“Thank you so much once again, Hanna, I wish you the same. Goodbye.”

Jane immediately called Matthew to make arrangements for the meeting. He asked her if she would mind if fifty or sixty people also participated in the discussion. He told her that about half of them would be members of the Belgian School of Buddhist Studies, and the rest would be members of the Congress of Freethinkers. Jane replied that the presence of other participants would enhance the occasion. She was visibly relieved and started making preparations right away for the trip to Brussels.

The next morning, she took Sarah to one of her cousins, and then she and her cousin and secretary, Victoria, took a train to Brussels, where they would stay with her aunt Maria. The next day, they arrived at the professor’s house punctually at 9:45 a.m. Matthew and his charming wife, Natalie, were waiting for them at the front door. After they all had introduced themselves warmly, Matthew and Natalie escorted them into a spacious room where the monk and about sixty people waited for them. The monk was in his mid-sixties and very friendly.

After Matthew had introduced Jane and the monk to each other, he introduced her to the others in the room; about half were men and the other half women. He told Jane that she should feel completely free to be with the monk without any time pressure and ask him whatever she wanted. They all agreed that the discussion would be very informal. She thanked Matthew and the monk profusely for the great favor. The monk’s name was Balangoda Ananda Maitre Thera. Matthew told her that since the monk’s name was very long and difficult to remember, she could address him as “Your Venerable.” They took their seats opposite each other.

The monk began the conversation. He spoke English very fluently. “I’m happy to meet you, Mrs...”

Seeing that the monk had difficulty recalling her family name, she quickly came to his aid.

“Your Venerable, you can just call me by my first name: Jane.”

“Oh, thank you, Jane. When one is no longer young, the memory does not function very well anymore.”

They all laughed heartily together. The monk then continued, “Jane, we can simply address each other as ‘you’ and ‘I’. Whenever I come into contact with non-Buddhists, I always tell them to address each other thus, because the informality makes the atmosphere more relaxed. But when I speak with Buddhist audiences, I cannot let them address me simply as ‘you,’ not because I crave their respect, but because they’ve been used to addressing all monks as ‘Your Venerable’ for generations. That’s why I urged Professor Fleming to use the more informal form of address with me from our first meeting. Please don’t be surprised if I call him by his first name, too, during our discussion. Well, Jane, I feel so honored that you want to talk to me. But I must tell you from the outset that you should not expect words of great wisdom from me. Of course, I’ll try my best to answer your questions as well as I can.”

The monk then turned to the audience and said, “Before we start our discussion, I’d like to make a humble request of you all. First, I’d like to remind you once again that I’m just an ordinary monk, so I don’t represent the Sangha’s views in my country. I wasn’t officially invited here in the name of the Congress of Freethinkers; I was approached by Matthew and his colleagues from the organization to give some lectures. I know that some of you are devoted Buddhists and belong to a couple of different schools, and some are interested in learning more about Buddhism in general. I don’t know what kind of questions Jane will raise, but I’ll try to answer her questions freely, which means many of my answers will be my personal opinions or my personal interpretations, based loosely on the teachings of the school to which I belong – namely, Theravada. In other words, many of my opinions will not necessarily reflect the beliefs or concepts of some of the other major Buddhist schools. So some of you may even be rather disappointed by my opinions. Therefore, I’d like to beg you for your understanding if any of my thoughts seem to contradict what

you've understood about Buddhism. Since an established Buddhist society did not invite me, I understand that I can freely express my personal views on the topics Jane will raise or anything I deem to be interesting to you."

All the participants expressed their understanding and signaled him to go ahead, so the monk continued after thanking them for their approval and understanding.

"Jane, Matthew told me very briefly about your life and your present agonies. How would you like to begin our discussion?"

"Thank you very much, Your Venerable. First of all, before we start, may I make a humble request? I started writing an autobiographical romance novel more than ten years ago. And I feel that I should share what you say today with as many people as possible. So I wonder if you'd allow me to use this material in my book?"

Her words aroused all the participants' curiosity, and the monk asked her, "You're writing a romance? Very interesting. I hope I'll be able to read it. And I have no objection at all. When will it be published?"

"Thank you very much. I don't know when I'll publish it. I may have to collect some more life experiences first, so it could even take some decades. But I can assure you that you'll be among the first to read it. If you don't mind, Victoria, my cousin and my secretary, will write down our discussion in shorthand, and in the end she'll read it back – or if time is tight I can send it to you, and you can check it. You'll then have the chance to add to or delete any parts you may wish. I'd be very grateful if you could give me written permission to use it in my book. I promise that I'll donate a certain amount of what I earn in royalties from the sales of the book to you personally or to any organizations according to your wishes."

"I agree with your proposals, Jane. I don't expect any donations from the sales of the book. And if you decide to donate anyway, I won't take anything for myself. From the moment I entered monkhood, I lost my attachment to all things material. I'll name two orphanages and a religious organization to which you may donate, though; they have an excellent reputation for their integrity."

“Thank you very much. But isn’t it against your religion for a monk to read novels? It contains some intimate passages.”

“So far as I know, there is not a single regulation regarding this. It could be because, in Buddha’s time, there were no novels yet ...”

He was suddenly interrupted by hearty laughter from the whole audience. He continued with a broad smile, “That was just a joke. But every monk can decide freely for himself what is appropriate and what is not. And I will be careful not to let any romantic scenes in the novel distract me from my spiritual endeavors.”

“Thank you very much, Your Venerable. Now, I’ve got so many questions to ask you, which I’ve listed on these sheets. But I’m worried that I might overburden you.”

Jane produced a couple of sheets of paper and showed them to the monk.

“Jane, you don’t need to worry about that. I’m only afraid that I might not have enough wisdom to give you satisfactory answers.”

“Thank you very much. I want to ask you to be patient with me since my questions are not listed systematically. I didn’t have enough time to do that. So I’ll have to jump around between different topics.”

“That’s okay, Jane. Don’t worry about that.”

Before Jane could say more, the monk had an idea. He turned to her and said, “Jane, wait a minute. An idea suddenly popped up, and I think I should tell you what it is. Since you want to integrate our discussion into your novel, shouldn’t we ask Matthew to tell us something about the Congress of Freethinkers? I’m sure the readers of your novel will be very interested to know about it.”

“Your Venerable, that’s an excellent idea. Matthew, would you please tell us about your organization? Everybody here, and my readers, will be very grateful, I’m sure.”

Matthew was delighted by the monk’s and Jane’s words and stood up. “Thank you very much for giving me this opportunity to tell you briefly about it. Well, Belgium’s well-known status as a seat of international associations and venue for international meetings in the decades preceding the First World War applies in the case of the Free-

thinkers and Freemasons. The foundation in 1880 of the International Federation of Freethinkers (IFF) took place at a conference in Brussels and preceded the creation of a national federation for Belgium. Although the Belgians had difficulty starting their own federation, they were key actors in free thought internationally, and Belgian leaders remained its core group for a long time. The series of Freethinkers' conferences that followed was significant in creating an extended network of international links between organizations and individuals—with Brussels as the center, where all the threads came together.

“Since the National Congress adopted its constitution on 7th February 1831, freedom of religion has been guaranteed by supreme law, which means that no one can be banned from, or forced to respect, a religion in Belgium. This constitution was considered the most liberal and progressive of its day; in addition to freedom of religion, it also guarantees freedom of education, association, and the press. This long tradition of toleration in religious and philosophical matters has recently been highlighted by the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU), an umbrella organization bringing together humanist, atheist, rationalist, secular, and skeptical free-thinking associations. A few words now about why we invited His Venerable: He is quite well known among religious and secular scholars in his country and especially in England for his unusual points of view on various topics. And we're very fortunate that he could come here amid the great battles that are being fought right now among our neighboring countries. I think this is enough for the time being. Thank you very much, everybody.”

The whole audience was grateful. After thanking Matthew profusely, the monk asked Jane to tell him her story.

“Thank you very much, Your Venerable. As you've heard, I'm suffering terribly with the loss of my daughter, so I'm looking for someone or something that can give me peace of mind. It's burning me up inside. Many Christian clerics have tried to comfort me by citing biblical verses and saying prayers for me, but they haven't given me the

slightest relief. I've also read some books and articles on Buddhism in the past few years, and I think your religion might give me peace of mind. I'd be very grateful if you'd tell me about the fundamental teachings of Buddhism. Unfortunately, all the books I've read so far were rather difficult to understand, so I couldn't get a clear picture."

"Jane, let's talk first about your present suffering since you're full of sorrow right now. A long discourse on Buddhism wouldn't help you through your suffering and give you peace of mind. Shall we?"

"Yes, Your Venerable."

"Just address me as 'You,' Jane. Matthew told me that your daughter was brilliant and calm. And that she rarely did anything impulsive. And was kind and helpful, and also quite courageous and religious. Are all these traits accurate?"

"Yes, everything you say is true. But may I address you anyway as 'Your Venerable'? I'd feel more comfortable with that."

"Well, if you feel like that, that's okay, Jane. You may also use both interchangeably if you like. Jane, would you mind reading your daughter's farewell letter for all of us to hear, if you have it with you? But if it'd worsen your sorrow, you don't need to feel obliged."

Jane was a bit reluctant. Every participant was observing her. At last, though, she took Jennifer's letter out of her handbag and began to read. As she slowly read, her voice was distorted by sorrow and her hands began to shake. But she made a great effort and read it through to the end. Everybody's eyes, including the monk's, were filled with tears. There was a long pause. Then the monk broke the silence.

"Thank you very much for reading it for us. As you see, we are all moved to tears by Jennifer's words. Jane, you should stop worrying about her. If she's alive, rest assured that she has done what she wanted to do. And if she's no longer alive, she has surely found her peace of mind. I know that this is easily said, and it will be challenging for you to accept it at the moment."

"I don't understand what you mean, Your Venerable."

"It's evident that she planned what she has done a long time ago."

And she will have considered every possible risk. So if she's still alive somewhere in the world, she'll undoubtedly have her peace. And if she's no longer on this earth, she'll have found eternal peace – perhaps in heaven where the biblical God may dwell. Either way, she's found her peace. And as she says in her letter, if she had stayed until the war came and the enemy mistreated her, you would suffer terribly – there would probably be nothing you could do to help her. You're fortunate that she left a letter for you. Just look at the countless wars around the world since recorded history began, in which millions of people vanished without a trace. If she had not left the letter, your suffering would be much worse.”

“Thank you very much, Your Venerable. I understand now what you mean, to some extent. These few words of wisdom alone have lessened my suffering already.”

“You might not yet fully understand everything I say because you're under such great stress. But think it over and you'll see the truth in it with time, and your suffering will further recede. I know that it takes a person an average of three years to detach himself from his emotional attachment to a lost loved one. In my case, it took me much longer than that to live without thinking all the time about all the family I lost. What is very important for you to understand is that no matter how much you're suffering, you cannot change what has happened.”

“Oh, you lost your whole family? I'm so sorry to hear that. And thank you so much for what you just said. I also feel guilty about her suffering, being a white person.”

“Yes, I lost my whole family in a flood. I was the only survivor. But let me tell you more about that later.”

Everybody expressed their deep sympathy for him. The monk continued, “Everybody, thank you so much. But Jane, it's not your fault that you were born white. It was not your choice. You should only feel guilty about something you did consciously. Matthew tells me that you're a very loving, warm-hearted and protective mother. In this, you've fulfilled your duty. Nothing will live forever on this

earth. Everything that came into existence in this universe will leave it again sooner or later. That is the laws of nature. If you can accept this reality, it'll be much easier for you to endure hardship, pain, and sorrow.”

“The laws of nature? What's that?”

“I'll explain what the laws of nature mean according to Buddhism: If you tell a Buddhist about the death of a loved one, he'll most likely say, 'Oh, I'm so sorry to hear that. But don't be so sad. It happened according to the laws of nature.' Buddhists have no illusions about the precarious existence of all beings in this world. So they can much more easily overcome their sorrows about the loss of their loved ones than, let's say, Christians.”

“All this is new to me. I'll need some time to digest it. But Christians believe in an eternal existence somewhere in the universe with the biblical God. What would you say about that?”

“I can only talk about these things from a Buddhist's point of view.”

“You've mentioned different schools of Buddhism. How many schools are there, and are their opinions on these matters uniform?”

“There are many of them, but three are most prominent: Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana, also known as Tibetan Buddhism. Their opinions are more or less the same on these matters.”

“Different schools mean there must be different doctrines or beliefs among them, though. Is that true?”

“Yes, that's true. But let's talk about some of those beliefs later, Jane.”

“And there's also another religion called Jainism, I suppose.”

“Yes, there is. But its adherents are quite a few compared to those of Hinduism and Buddhism. We wouldn't have enough time to discuss it.”

“Okay, then. Now, my next question is: Have you ever read the Jewish and Christian Bibles? If so, I'm curious to find out how a Buddhist sees them.”

“You mean the Old Testament or Hebrew Bible and the New Tes-

tament? I've never studied any Christian theology systematically, but I've read these Bibles several times from beginning to end, and quite a lot of Christian literature and the doctrines of many Churches as well. Not only that, but I've had several discussions with some leading Christian theologians and clergymen. Unfortunately, I haven't studied much about Judaism, partly because the population that professes it is relatively small compared to other great religions' adherents. Its impact on humankind is also less significant, I think. Another important reason I'm interested in Christianity is that it has shaped a large portion of humankind's destiny in either a positive or negative way since its birth."

"I'm glad to know that you've read these Bibles and other Christian literature, and that you've had serious discussions with theologians and clergymen. I'd therefore like to ask you some questions concerning Christianity, too."

"Well, I've always avoided openly speaking about Christianity until now – in either a positive or a negative way. But I'll tell you frankly today what I think about it. So I'd like to tell you something in advance: I'll use the word Bible in plural form when your questions and my answers are directly relevant to both religions, but if an issue is relevant only to Judaism, I'll say 'the Old Testament' or 'the Hebrew Bible' In like manner, if it's an issue of Christianity alone, I'll use the phrase 'New Testament.' And another important point I'd like to make in advance is that as I look at Christian theology from an independent observer's perspective, many of my opinions may seem quite radically different from the established theological concepts in colonialist countries. Therefore, I'd like to beg you for your understanding and tolerance in advance."

"That'd be even more fascinating, and I can imagine that your points of view certainly would be very refreshing for me and for many people in the West."

"May I ask you a question before I continue?"

"Of course, Your Venerable."

"Thank you. You said a while ago that you might even need a few

decades to collect all the material for your novel. How long could it be – two, three, four decades?”

“As I cannot foresee how long I’ll live or what’ll happen to me in the future, I cannot give you a precise answer. But I’d like to take as long as possible before I publish it because as I’m financially secure, I wouldn’t need to publish to make a living out of it. But at least two to three decades, I suppose.”

“Thank you very much, Jane. The reason I ask you this question is that some of the opinions I’ll express could make many powerful state, religious and political institutions and their leaders in the Christian West very uncomfortable. Therefore, I’d like to suggest that you integrate the ones that could be too controversial only into your final draft when it’s ready for publication; otherwise, some unexpected problems could arise prematurely and unnecessarily. That means you won’t integrate controversial ideas into the drafts you may make for distribution among your friends. Hopefully, the powerful institutions and personalities in question will become more liberal and tolerant of new ideas thirty or forty years from now.”

“Thank you. I understand and fully agree. My next question is: Despite your deep knowledge of Christianity, you remain a Buddhist monk. Does that mean that you feel Buddhism is superior to Christianity?”

“In my opinion, every religion is unique in its own ways. I’ll never use the word ‘superior’ in this context. The simple reason is that as there are various conflicting doctrines among the several branches of Judaism and Christianity, there are also different concepts, interpretations and rituals among the Buddhist schools.”

“Thank you very much. May I put my question differently, then: Are you sure that what you believe in is the ‘absolute truth’?”

“It’s not easy to talk about absolute truth or reality, or truths or realities for everybody, while we’re living in this world as human beings. In my opinion, we can talk about truth or reality only in certain contexts. For example, you’re a woman and I’m a man. That’s an absolute truth. Before you die, you’re still alive. Once you’re dead,

you're no longer alive. These are absolute truths. But the question of whether or not, or in what form or in what way, our soul or consciousness might exist beyond this human existence is pure speculation."

"But don't Buddhists believe in birth and rebirth? Isn't that an absolute truth?"

"Yes, it should be an absolute truth. Most Buddhists believe it to be so. But the problem is that nobody has ever seen a human soul, or consciousness, that has been reincarnated. There are several people in my country and elsewhere in Asia who may have been reincarnated. Many of them were born with inexplicable birthmarks and could recall their past lives when they were still young – say, until they were four or five years old – or, for example, how they died. When these people get older, they slowly begin to forget their early memories. And none of them can recall how the process happened. For example, the Tibetan Lamas claim to be able to steer where they want to be reborn. But even then their disciples or fellow monks have to consult mediums, astrology and other methods to learn about their reincarnations and prove or disprove whether the reincarnations are genuine or not. An interesting book on the subject, the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* by Evans-Wentz, was published in 1927 by the Oxford University Press. A layperson may have difficulty understanding its contents. Among Asian societies where reincarnations are said to be common, it's generally believed that those who died by violence are more often reborn. That's why nearly all of them have birthmarks. But there's a big, big question mark. Countless people have died in wars from their wounds, so theoretically, many of them – if not all – should have been reincarnated. But why don't all of those reincarnated have birthmarks? Another question is, if only those who die by violence reincarnate, how could the Tibetan Lamas, who die peacefully, be reborn? Then the next question is: Who or what decides who should or should not be born again? Most Buddhists would simply say that it happens according to one's karma, or one's karma will decide. But what is karma? Is it a living force or a divine being? Nobody knows

for sure. Countless questions don't have answers for non-initiates – or even perhaps for initiates as well – in many cases. You can, of course, easily repeat what is written about it in scripture, but that doesn't solve the essential nature of it.”

“It's so fascinating, Your Venerable. You mentioned the soul and consciousness. Could you explain?”

“Well, some people believe that it is the soul that keeps on reincarnating, while some others believe it to be the consciousness. And some people believe the two to be the same thing. But I don't burden myself too much with this abstract question because I know that I'll never find a satisfactory answer in this life, and even if I did find it, I wouldn't know what to do with the knowledge.”

“Still, would you please kindly tell me what the human soul, according to Buddhism, *is*?”

“I think I need to explain first the different concepts of it in Hinduism and Buddhism. According to Hinduism or Hindu philosophy, the soul is called *Atman*; the Hindus believe every living being has a soul. It's a person's 'true self,' which keeps on reincarnating. It is indestructible; it is unchanging; it is eternal – ageless. But the Buddha rejected this concept. This is a major point of difference with the Buddhist doctrine of *Anatta*, which holds that there is no soul or self. The Buddhist concept of reincarnation is that a 'stream of consciousness' links life with life. The process of change from one life to the next is called *punarbhava* (Sanskrit) or *punabbhava* (Pāli), literally 'becoming again,' or more briefly *bhava*, 'becoming.'”

“Since you're a Buddhist, you surely believe in the Buddhist concept?”

“If I'm to be honest, I think the Hindu concept is more acceptable in this case.”

Everybody was surprised by the monk's words.

“But you remain a Buddhist, nevertheless?”

“There are many reasons why I remain a Buddhist, despite this 'heresy,' but we won't have enough time to discuss them in detail.”

“Could you please mention at least one or two reasons anyway?”

“I’ll mention just two: the caste system of Hinduism and its concept of God. Hindus worship one Supreme Being called Brahman, though by different names. This Supreme God has innumerable divine powers. When God is formless, He is referred to by the term Brahman. When God has form, He is referred to by the term Paramatma. So the three forms of an Almighty God are Brahma – the creator, Vishnu – the sustainer, and Shiva – the destroyer. Hinduism’s unique understanding is that God is not far away and living in a remote heaven, but is inside every soul, in the heart and consciousness, waiting to be discovered. And the goal of Hinduism is knowing God in this intimate experiential way.”

“Could you perhaps tell me what you think about these definitions?”

“I must honestly admit that these definitions are too abstract for me.”

“Isn’t it dangerous to propound such a heresy in Buddhism? If you were a Christian in the Middle Ages and openly expressed an idea that did not conform with your Church’s doctrine, you’d surely be tortured to death or burned alive at the stake.”

“In Buddhism, nobody can impose upon you any belief. That’s the very good side of my religion. Everything is voluntary. I alone am responsible for my actions and their consequences. And I’d like to tell you an intellectual curiosity of mine concerning the concept of endless rebirth: Humans are developing more and more sophisticated and powerful weapons, so nobody can rule out that someday somebody might develop weapons capable of destroying this planet and all the living beings on it. So imagine what would happen to this concept if there were no more human beings on earth. It’s perhaps just a crazy thought. By the way, you might find it interesting to know that Buddhists regard their religion as ‘the middle way.’”

“Thank you very much. It’s so fascinating. And the human consciousness, according to Buddhism?”

“The explanations are again very abstract. Numerous Buddhist scholars have tried to explain it, but there’s not a single clear-cut an-

swer that can be easily understood. It's no wonder that, like the great scientists and philosophers, Buddhist scholars cannot agree upon any concrete definitions. They can only speculate."

"You must surely have given it some thought, though. And if so, would you please let me know what you think about it?"

"I'll tell you something you might find interesting, but it's my own speculation, and it has nothing to do with Buddha's teachings. Although I've told you that I find the Hindu concept of 'soul' more acceptable for me, I think one cannot completely rule out that what reincarnates could be consciousness, since humans can reincarnate as animals, too. If what reincarnates is the soul, it might have difficulty retaining its 'form' when it reincarnates as an animal. But this is just an intellectual curiosity. I hope I've not baffled you too much. I don't think any living human being will ever find out the truth about the soul and consciousness."

The audience's reaction was a mixture of confusion and fascination. The next moment, the monk continued, "Now I'll tell you a little bit more about this topic. Like the scientists, philosophers and psychologists, I don't know whether consciousness comes from the brain or the mind or the soul, or from all of them, or what the mind itself is. I've never, therefore, burdened myself with this puzzle very profoundly. However, I find consciousness itself very interesting for several reasons. Buddhism, of course, has a theory about it. According to this theory, there are nine levels of consciousness. But these levels are probably difficult even for highly qualified Buddhist scholars to fully understand. Of course, one can repeat what is written about it in scripture without genuinely understanding its deep meanings. So I'll try to explain it in a simple way. In general, we all know that people have five senses. But in reality, I think there must be several other kinds of consciousness, with many different levels or degrees. Among them could be love, hatred, jealousy, anxiety, happiness, sorrow, pleasure, loneliness, gratitude, compassion, and so on. Some people may have more and some less. Generally speaking, people have different interests. Some are interested in politics, some

in religion, some in music, some in sports, some in literature, some in the military, some in science, some in the arts, and some in several subjects simultaneously, et cetera. And they try to develop their skills or deepen their knowledge in their fields of interest. As a result, their consciousness in areas in which they're not interested may be less developed."

"Do you think some animals might also have some sort of consciousness?"

"It's said that animals have only instinct – the survival instinct. But I think some animals may have some basic consciousness as well. When a baby – either human or animal – is born, it immediately knows where to find milk. That's instinct. Just have a look at several species of birds that build very sophisticated nests without being taught by their parents – and they also know automatically when they should start building their nests. That's instinct. All animals know how to mate with each other without having been taught. That's instinct. But if you put an animal on one edge of a deep gorge and food on the other edge, it might take the risk and jump into the gorge in the hope that it will survive and get the food, since if it didn't do that it'd die a slow death anyway. Or it might decide to starve itself to death instead of trying to get the food by jumping into the gorge. The capacity to make such a calculation, I think, is consciousness. Therefore, I assume that animals also must have some basic consciousness. I don't have any idea how psychologists and philosophers would interpret it. But how can one prove if an animal has a high level of consciousness? My simple criteria are whether an animal can feel sorrow, happiness, thankfulness, loneliness, and whether it has highly developed memories, et cetera. In my opinion, only dogs fulfill these criteria. So the level or levels of a dog's consciousness must be rather high – even higher than in some people. Their only problem, perhaps, is that they cannot express their feelings verbally like humans. Some human beings are not capable of being thankful or happy or sad. It may sound arrogant of me, but I often wonder whether many of the people I've observed closely were fully conscious or even aware at

all of their own lives and their surroundings. So I ask myself very often if such people's consciousness might only be slightly higher than the basic survival instinct of the animals."

"I know that compassion is one of the most important elements of Buddhism. Would you tell me what it means?"

"Yes, it is indeed one of the most important elements, and is called *karuna*. But instead of telling you what it is according to Buddhist scripture, I'll tell you how I interpret it. I think it takes many different forms. But since we don't know how long our discussion will last, let us deal with them – and consciousnesses as well – in the most simple way. You may have compassion only for certain types of people and under certain conditions – for instance, you cannot be compassionate with someone you know is bad or ungrateful. And it's very easy to manipulate it through religious, racial, or political ideologies. Just look at the present German racial ideology or the Hindu caste system, to name but two examples. In my opinion, compassion is a fickle thing – you may most likely have a higher degree of compassion for your own family, friends, someone from your ethnic group or your religious or political circles, than for those from outside these circles. In other words, all types of compassion are subject to different conditions. So it's not easy to preach and persuade everybody to cultivate and practice it toward everybody else. And some people are born with a certain degree of compassion, whereas in some people it may be absent. It may be possible to persuade some people to develop and practice it, but it wouldn't work with others. Just look at sadistic people who experience satisfaction by causing or seeing innocent people's or animals' suffering. It might be possible to teach some people who lack compassion in their lives to cultivate it through, say, some form of religious concept; or they might develop it alone in the course of their lives through their experiences. Some may never even be aware of its existence. There are a lot of people in this world who cannot understand why some people feel compassion toward animals."

"Could there be any connection between compassion and higher levels of consciousness in any field?"