

The Primordial Tradition

*THINKING ALLOWED
Conversations On The Leading Edge
Of Knowledge and Discovery
With Dr. Jeffrey Mishlove*



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JEFFREY MISHLOVE, Ph.D.: Hello and welcome. Our topic today is "The Primordial Tradition" -- the perennial philosophy or the common thread that links and unites all religions and all spiritual traditions, from every culture and age of humanity. With me is Professor Huston Smith, a former professor of philosophy and religion at MIT and Syracuse University, currently affiliated with the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California. Dr. Smith is the author of *Religions of Man*, a classic book which has sold over two million copies, as well as *Beyond the Post-Modern Mind*, and *Forgotten Truth*. Welcome, Huston.

HUSTON SMITH, Ph.D.: Thank you.

MISHLOVE: It's good to have you here.

SMITH: It's good to be here.

MISHLOVE: When we talk about the primordial tradition, the term implies something that goes back beyond recorded history to the most ancient roots of humanity.

SMITH: That's true. It does have the ring, and is intended to have the ring, of being timeless -- and, I would add, spaceless as well, because it was not only always, but everywhere. So the easy way to think of primordial is no matter where or when.

MISHLOVE: In a sense it transcends our whole notion, then, of the physical universe as being limited by space and time.

SMITH: That's true. That universe, the space-time world, fits into the primordial tradition but does not exhaust it. There are reaches beyond the physical.

MISHLOVE: So I guess in a sense one might say that our modern scientific outlook, with its materialistic philosophy, and all of our technology, from your perspective might be properly seen as embedded within this larger primordial tradition.

SMITH: That's exactly right. With the advent of modern science, I think we've discovered a near-perfect method for learning about the physical reaches of reality. The danger is that our excitement at what we're discovering and what we can do there will divert our attention from other regions of reality which continue to exist whether we attend to them or not.

MISHLOVE: I think it's marvelous in a way, that in an age -- and I guess throughout our history we've had religious wars and conflicts between almost every religious group -- that you're able to see the common thread that links them, that unites them all. And I guess it does have to do with this notion of going beyond the temporal world itself.

SMITH: Well, that's part of it for sure, but it was really while writing the book *Religions of Man*, in which I do endeavor to paint portraits, you might say, of the major enduring religions traditions. In writing those chapters I became more and more struck by recurrent themes which seemed to surface just time and again like echoes. That led on to the later book, *Forgotten Truth*, in which, so to speak, I tried to run a sieve through the great religious traditions and see what emerged by way of common denominators that ran through them all.

MISHLOVE: One of the things that you point out is that where in the scientific frame of mind we see ourselves sort of in the middle world -- in between the vast reaches of space and the microscopic world of atoms and cells and molecules -- and yet in the primordial tradition we're in a different middle world.

SMITH: That's true. The middle world that science places us in is sometimes called the macro world, which is in between the micro world of the incredibly small and the mega world of the incredibly large. But all of those, once one thinks about it, are distinctions of space. They are quantitative, whereas in the primordial tradition, again, it sees us as situated in a middle world, but there the order of measure is quality. We're in the middle of a world which is a middle world, but also in a way a middling world. It's fifty percent happiness, fifty percent sorrow; fifty percent knowledge, fifty percent being in the dark about things. It is again situated midway between what in the traditional cosmologies are shown as the heavens, which are incomparably better, and the hells, which are also, alas, incomparably worse. But the interesting point is the difference in quality, whereas science gives us almost the same structure, but in quantitative rather than qualitative terms.

MISHLOVE: I guess because science has become such a dominant theme of our modern culture, we often tend to dismiss the religious worlds -- the heavens, the hells, the worlds

of demons and spirits -- as being, well, we can't test them, we can't measure them, therefore they're irrelevant, they don't exist, they're nonscientific. Yet it may be that the methods of science simply have nothing to say. It doesn't mean that these aren't important for us.

SMITH: Well, I think you're exactly right. Just because the science of acoustics can't handle the notion of beauty, it doesn't follow that Brahms isn't beautiful. And it's much the same going on there. Science everywhere can pick up quantitative distinctions, but qualitative ones, like beauty and spirit, really slip through its nets like the sea slips through the nets of fishermen.

MISHLOVE: Ultimately it seems as if the human mind is intimately linked to these spiritual worlds.

SMITH: Well, that's wherein we live and move and have our being, really. If we talk about the lived world, it's the qualitative world, you know. The quantitative world is there, but the world that we live out our lives in, this is the world of ups and downs and joys and sorrows and disappointment. So it is really in the qualitative world, dimension, that our lives are lived.

MISHLOVE: I have sometimes wondered if our very thoughts aren't the same as spirits. I mean, where do our thoughts come from sometimes? They often seem to have an energy of their own. Does that sound far-fetched to you?

SMITH: Now, let me see. Our thoughts come from the spirits?

MISHLOVE: Or perhaps our thoughts are spirits, in a way. Each of our thoughts, or at least many of them.

SMITH: I see. Well, I do believe what the primordial tradition would say, namely that there is a continuum between our thoughts and -- what shall we say? -- a psychic realm of reality. And our minds sort of swim and maneuver in that psychic or spirit dimension of reality, in the way our bodies swim or maneuver in the natural physical world. So I think in that sense there is a commonality and a continuity between our thoughts, and if you want to say spirits as the objective reality of which our thoughts would be the subjective side, why yes, that could be said.

MISHLOVE: Well, you're putting it much more elegantly than I had. One of the terms you just mentioned, continuity, is interesting, because when we deal in the realm of infinity, as the primordial tradition does, there is this sense of all of creation being a continuity, from the most sublime to the most horrible, and that creation itself, or the realms of evolution, the middle world, is a world in which every possibility expresses itself one way or another.

SMITH: There is a prodigiousness, almost a prodigality of being, in terms of how all the recesses and crannies of possibility somehow seem to need to be filled.

MISHLOVE: The issue of the soul is an important one.

SMITH: Of the soul. You sound like you're starting like Plato. Let's talk about the soul. Good.

MISHLOVE: The soul is something which -- well, I saw a book recently that talked about how there is no more soul; we've done away with the soul in modern culture. It's kind of a quaint, archaic notion, but it's unnecessary now, and we're much better off without it.

SMITH: Well, it makes me think of the last time I saw His Holiness the Dalai Lama. He was at a conference in Bombay on science and religion, and there were a couple of Nobel science winners there -- George Wald from Harvard was one. The Dalai Lama gave the opening inaugural address, and he was commending the scientists as to what they'd done for humanity. But then he said, "But then in addition to the physical, the material world, there is the invisible world." He said, "That might be awkward for you scientists, but never mind, it's there anyway." I liked the kind of direct way in which he came on. And that applies to the soul. Certainly the soul will not show up on any brain scan, and it won't show up on any diagnostic tool that the psychologists have, but that doesn't mean that it doesn't exist. It's just that there are different regions of reality, and certain instruments are splendid for picking up certain dimensions. Well, the radio and the television give a perfect example. Because certain waves are not picked up on a given frequency finder, that doesn't mean that those waves aren't there. This room is filled with waves that simply are not visible at this moment.

MISHLOVE: In your book you describe that the attempt to find the soul, to examine it, is something akin to trying to see one's own eyes by stepping backwards.

SMITH: That's another way to look at it, yes, that's quite right, quite right.

MISHLOVE: And yet just as we earlier described the mind as swimming in this sea of spiritual activity, the soul yearns for something more, I gather -- something more than the realms of heaven and hell, something closer to the divine.

SMITH: To the divine and the infinite. I think that's true. I think that the soul is at one and the same time the final locus of our individuality. It is what makes you, Jeffrey Mishlove, unlike any other person who ever has been or will be, and yet is constant with you throughout your career. That's one thing, but it also has a tropism, a kind of dynamism in it, in which it is forever reaching beyond anything you have ever attained thus far, and it will never stop that reaching until, we're told, it finally loses its individuality by merging with the infinite.

MISHLOVE: So there is a sense there that all of my yearning, all of my desires -- not just mine, everybody's yearnings -- are ultimately the yearnings of the soul, and perhaps we seek to satisfy ourselves through career advancement or through the attainment of

material wealth, but ultimately these things are only, I suppose, poor substitutes for what the soul really desires.

SMITH: That's very well put -- that that's what we think we want. But the fact that when we get it, no matter what it is, how wonderful, it still cannot satisfy us completely, is evidence that it's ultimately not what we really wanted. It is the symbol, you might say, of what we really wanted.

MISHLOVE: I suppose this must be why many religious traditions talk about the need to let go of desire -- that desires sort of interfere with the real spiritual path.

SMITH: That's a very complex and tricky subject, desires. They can be evidence of greed and clinging and grasping, but Buddhism and Hinduism, that really are the most severe in talking about desires, nevertheless both of them immediately acknowledge that there are some desires that are wonderful -- the desire to help other people, the desire to grow and become more than one has achieved, all of those. So we have to winnow when we come to desires, and separate those that are helpful from those that hold us back.

MISHLOVE: In your book *Forgotten Truth* you have this marvelous quote from the Sufi poet Jelaluddin Rumi. It describes how a lover has an ardent desire to kiss. But what is being kissed could be just like clay; after all, the body is made out of clay. It's some other quality, some beautiful quality that the gods create and the object of our desire, that exists independently of the clay in which it's embodied, and that is what we're really searching for.

SMITH: You've come close. I wish we could from memory bring back those lines, but it's something about the beloved is saying "'Tis that" -- namely, the ultimate -- "that you were seeking and were reaching for when you touched my lips, not these lips of clay." Beautiful poem.

MISHLOVE: That poem, that notion, really I suppose captures the idea of the yearnings of the soul -- the yearnings that we all ultimately have, I guess is what you're saying.

SMITH: That's right. And in a way every desire that we seek, it's that ultimate that we are really seeking which shows itself in fragments to us through the concrete object that we think we're reaching for and really are reaching for, but we're reaching really for what is beyond that, but that's all of it that we see at the moment.

MISHLOVE: Another term that you've used that sort of gets at this is the notion of being. I was struck at one point, you said that a murderer about to kill somebody may be a person who is about to actualize his being in some way. I wonder if we could talk about the relationship between being and the yearnings of the soul.

SMITH: Well, there is a connection between fulfillment and degree of being. It's a subtle one, but we get at it when we get at authentic and inauthentic being. An inauthentic life somehow is a partial, a shriveled, a shrunken life, whereas the notion of an authentic life

has an expansive quality. The notion of being picks up on that; so that infinite being, as the Hindus say -- but you find it in other traditions too -- is also infinite wisdom and infinite bliss. So it's this amplitude of all the virtues which the notion of being ultimately gathers up.

MISHLOVE: There is a sense, I guess, that the closer we move to the divine, the more meaning our life has -- the more every moment is imbued with qualities of not just meaning, but I think you also suggest, power.

SMITH: Power is there too. Really all the virtues keep lock step as they advance. So greater wisdom and greater power and greater beauty and greater bliss -- they all rise concomitantly towards the goal wherein they lost their distinctness and completely merge in what is of course beyond words at that point.

MISHLOVE: And yet there's a paradox, isn't there, in that the seeker who is driven by these yearnings, these strivings of the soul, to achieve that closeness to God, that somehow one can never really attain that. One is always a seeker, never an attainer, from the position of the soul, from the position of the separateness of our identity.

SMITH: Well, that's probably true in this life, but all of the traditions point to a continuity which is shrouded in mystery, and probably the very nature of our minds makes it impossible for us to imagine. But if we do not stop the picture with physical death, then there is a completion. In the West it's called the beatific vision, and some have a dualistic image. Beatific image implies that there is something that one is enthralled by, but the viewer is separate from it. But then other statements use images like, "The dewdrop merges into the shining sea" -- at which point of course the dewdrop loses its separate identity, and there is absolute oneness with the ultimate.

MISHLOVE: And that sense of oneness, that sense of unity, transcends even the yearnings of the soul, I suppose.

SMITH: Right. It's like rivers will have reached the sea. So I think it's not ultimately true that this yearning goes on forever. I think there is a time when it phases beyond time, and is ultimately and totally fulfilled.

MISHLOVE: Isn't there a Sufi statement to the effect that the seeker can never satisfy his yearnings, but only those who seek find?

SMITH: Oh, I know what you're referring to. Let's see. There is the Sufi saying, "You cannot seek him by finding him, yet only those who seek him find him." The point of that is to say that by our own efforts we cannot do it, and yet our efforts are required in the doing which is more than our own doing.

MISHLOVE: Many people in all walks of life who aren't consciously seekers seem to have glimpses of this union, of these satori states.

SMITH: Sure.

MISHLOVE: They happen spontaneously to people.

SMITH: Maslow even called it the peak experience, and of course they admit of all grades and degrees, but at least they're intimations of the same reality, I think.

MISHLOVE: I guess the difference is that if the person is consciously on that path, they will make more of these experiences, these gifts of grace, perhaps, when they come.

SMITH: I think they'll understand their nature somewhat more, yes.

MISHLOVE: As a philosopher yourself, a person who has explored the primordial tradition, I would have to assume that a large part of your own world view has been conditioned by experiences such as this that may have occurred spontaneously to you, or perhaps through your own scholarly striving or other disciplines.

SMITH: Well, experience of a sort. I think it's useful to distinguish between experience and discernment. Discernment is a kind of understanding, and you spoke of me, so I'll speak personally on that. I think that somehow I have been blessed with a capacity to discern what the mystics in all cultures have been speaking about, and resonate to it as true. Now, it's a different thing to actually experience, you might say in the full light of day, the advanced realities that the mystics come upon. And on that front I make no great claims. I've had some experiences -- as distinct from discernment -- I've had some experiences but they're of kind of ordinary garden variety.

MISHLOVE: When we talk about the ultimate experience, I guess it's one of union, is it not?

SMITH: Yes.

MISHLOVE: A feeling of identity with this beyond space and time, with the infinite.

SMITH: Right.

MISHLOVE: And as one looks at it in various traditions, it's often described as being indescribable, is it not?

SMITH: Well, it certainly is, in the sense that anyone who has had that realizes how futile words are in conveying that experience to others. But that doesn't mean that they don't talk all night about it, because it's not an absolute cut-off. You can do your best, but it does not fit into the categories and language of our ordinary experience. It's not just a different experience, it's a different kind of experience.

MISHLOVE: And yet in a sense it's the basic ground from which all of our experience emerges.

SMITH: I think that's true.

MISHLOVE: That seems to be a good ending point, in a sense to realize where we end is where we start.

SMITH: That's right. Our end is in our beginning.

MISHLOVE: Well, Dr. Huston Smith, it's been a real pleasure having you with me again.

SMITH: Likewise.

MISHLOVE: Thank you very much for being with me.

SMITH: You're welcome.