

Tricycle Talks

“Searching for Paradise”

Episode #82 with Pico Iyer

January 11, 2023



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James Shaheen: Hello, and welcome to *Tricycle Talks*. I’m James Shaheen, editor-in-chief of *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*. For 50 years, Pico Iyer has been traveling the globe, seeking out sacred sites from the hidden shrines of Tehran to the funeral pyres of Varanasi. Iyer believes that travel can help us confront questions that we tend to avoid or bypass when we’re at home, forcing us out of our usual routines and bringing us into contact with the “crisscrossing of cultures.” In his latest book, *The Half Known Life: In Search of Paradise*, Iyer investigates how different cultures have understood the notion of paradise, recounting his travels to contested places including Jerusalem, Kashmir, Sri Lanka, and Ladakh. In today’s episode of *Tricycle Talks*, I sit down with Pico to discuss the risks of the commercialization of paradise, the power of not knowing, and how we can find paradise in the midst of impermanence.

James Shaheen: So I'm here with writer Pico Iyer. Hi, Pico, it's great to be with you.

Pico Iyer: Really nice to talk to you again, James.

James Shaheen: Good to see you. So Pico, we're here to talk about your new book, *The Half Known Life: In Search of Paradise*. So I'd like to start by asking you about the title. What is the half known life? And what is this notion of paradise that we're searching for?

Pico Iyer: Well, the notion of paradise would take a lifetime not to be able to explain, so I'll start with the easy part. In the age of information which we inhabit, we actually know less about the rest of the world than ever before, and least of all about the places we hear most about, such as Cuba, Iran, and North Korea. This is partly because we're getting so much of the world secondhand through screens and projections of our notions of them rather than through firsthand

Tricycle Talks

“Searching for Paradise”

Episode #82 with Pico Iyer

January 11, 2023



reality. I worry that we know less even about our neighbors than previously. But in a deeper sense, for me, the half-known is the source of everything essential in life: when we fall in love, when we have an epiphany, when we're terrified. We can't begin to explain those things. And yet they determine our lives much more than the things that we seem to be on top of. We might tell ourselves we're masters of the universe, but I think we're really servants of the universe. I almost imagine us living inside a tiny lighted tent in the middle of a vast darkness under the Himalayas and under the stars. We steady ourselves by holding on to the little that we know. But really, we're defined and shaped by this vastness we can't begin to understand. And so I suppose the book is a call to humility and a reminder to address the things we can't hope to know because that's where the substance of our life takes place.

James Shaheen: Is it fair to say we have a pretty mistaken notion, then, of our own agency and that we're shaped by forces that we don't really know?

Pico Iyer: Entirely, and we feel that now in the age of hurricanes and viruses and forest fires. In the book, in almost every place I visit, I'm with a guide. In other words, I'm in the passenger seat. I'm at the mercy of individuals and everything that's much larger around me. I think that connects with the sense that many of us have now that there's nothing worse than being in the know. In our ever more divided world, more and more people are saying, "I know more than you" or "I know better than you." And nothing can be more dangerous, I think, than that assumption. Buddhism talks a lot about the don't-know mind, which has always been essential to our well-being. But I think it matters now more than ever because of the illusion of knowledge or the allure of knowingness, the feeling that we have all this information at our fingertips, where actually, we don't have a clue.

James Shaheen: OK, so that's the first half of the title. Now the harder part: “In Search of Paradise.” What is it that we're searching for? And how do you understand this notion that we



have of paradise? You talk about its genesis etymologically and its roots in Iran moving to Greece. Why don't you talk about that a bit? Because it really drives the book, this search.

Pico Iyer: Yes. The first thing I'll say is that that subtitle is not entirely mine. I think that paradise, like happiness or peace or calm, is not found by looking for it, that it comes upon us or we put ourselves in the right place where it can visit us more than it being something to be discovered. I begin the book in Iran because that's where the word paradise came into being. Iran, I think, more than anywhere, has given us this vision of a paradise on earth, these beautiful gardens with soft music and colored lights and tea and you stretch out on the divan and you feel as if mortal life couldn't be more comfortable than this. At the same time, of course, contemporary Iran is in thrall to the Islamic notion of paradise, which is quite strict and which actually says that those most guaranteed of paradise are martyrs who give their lives for the cause. So Iran right now is a place where the ruling mullahs have one idea of what paradise is, and the people in private, the individual citizens, have another notion of paradise, probably having to do with earthly pleasures. And both parties quote the Sufis, who know that paradise can only be found inside, in a way of being in the world. This was also a book I wrote during the pandemic. Living so close to death made many of us ask, How do we want to live? Suddenly, putting a pause on our days made us see what we were doing wrong before and see how perhaps we could do better in the future. It was a sudden visitation of reality, reminding us that we don't have agency and reminding me that the only paradise I could find would be within this reality. It reminded me that this state of uncertainty and anxiety that many of us knew keenly during the pandemic was the only home that we have on Earth and therefore the home we were obliged to make comfortable or to turn into a paradise. As I was writing this book, I suppose my sense was: How can we turn the life we know with all its difficulties and its impermanence into the best kind of paradise we can have here on Earth? And then as you saw, I turn often to His Holiness, the Dalai Lama and others to try to guide me towards that. It's almost a pilgrimage into real life, I suppose.



James Shaheen: I'm getting from you that this is something that we find within, which is consistent with the great spiritual traditions. You write, "After years of travel, I'd begun to wonder what kind of paradise can ever be found in a world of unceasing conflict and whether the very search for it might not simply aggravate our differences." Can you say more about this paradox of how the search for paradise can bring about its opposite?

Pico Iyer: Yes. And as I listen to you deliver that sentence, what really came to my mind was notions of paradise are what keep us from paradise. Paradise, by definition, is open to everybody. This is at the heart of Mahayana Buddhism. And so the notion that I have a paradise that excludes you is already an expulsion from paradise. I was writing this book in response to an ever more divided world in which each group has its own, often strict notion of the paradise that awaits them that excludes almost all of us. And so in that sense, to think that you know what paradise is and that other people don't know is a great obstruction, which is why I'm happier to say I don't know what it is. It's what we don't know that really brings us together more than what we know. At the very heart of this book is the sense that His Holiness, the Dalai Lama, describes in his book, *Beyond Religion*. He always stresses the secular and says how grateful he is that the secular is written into the Indian constitution, in your delivers, talks on the Gospels is, calls himself a defender of Islam, consults rabbis, and most of all, powers before science, which gives us an empirical, universal sense of what is true. My sense is that he's witnessed so much violence and dogmatism perpetrated in the name of religion that he wants to rescue us from some of the doctrines or imprisoning notions that religion can bring and take us back to a human reality of responsibility and kindness and interdependence where, freed of our notions of paradise, we can see that we belong to everybody else and vice versa. There's almost the sense that to talk about paradise with a big P is to exclude most of humanity from it and probably, therefore, to make it something other than paradise. I know there are people who are sincerely committed to their faiths who would rightly challenge me on that, but I do think we're living in a time of exclusions

Tricycle Talks

“Searching for Paradise”

Episode #82 with Pico Iyer

January 11, 2023



and we need to find something inclusive. So I suppose the paradise I would believe in is one that's in the middle of Times Square, where everybody in herself has the chance to make something compassionate and clear in the midst of that.

James Shaheen: That's so nicely put. You're talking about the conflict between people with different understandings or notions or beliefs in paradise. But you also write about a more internal kind of conflict, the tension between earthly and divine paradises, or the conflict between paths of self-denial and sensuality. Can you say more about this tension and how you've seen it play out in your travels, particularly in your time in Iran?

Pico Iyer: So the first thing I'll say is what you just said sounded to me like a description of the Buddha's life. When he left his golden palace, he explored both those extremes, including the extreme of self-denial, and came to his realization by sitting still and realizing that we create the world by how we look at it and how we think of it and coming up with this notion of the middle way and also this very practical physician's notion that what stands in our way is suffering, and there are certain ways we can disable suffering and free ourselves from it. So I think that's almost a notion guiding us through the world. In Iran, as you say, I came upon gardens and restaurants that were as a delicacy as anything I had ever touched. And I came upon a society of great watchfulness and suspicion, really, because the people there—we see this in the headlines today—are always having to read the almost imperceptible intentions of the government. So the government is always spying on its people. And so even as each has its strong sense of paradise, you're in this very mortal fallen world of everybody trying to suss out where everybody else is. The book begins in bright summer sunshine in Iran as I traveled through it a few years ago, and it ends in this intense fog in Varanasi. Externally, it's a voyage from seeming clarity to uncertainty, to the don't-know fog in which we have to prosecute our lives. But beneath that, in Iran, I take it as a place of great suspicion. In contemporary Iran, nobody knows where she stands, and everybody has to work out, if possible, where everybody else stands. And it ends in Varanasi,

Tricycle Talks

“Searching for Paradise”

Episode #82 with Pico Iyer

January 11, 2023



which is this amazing chaos, but it's about trusting and loving, throwing one's arms around that chaos. And so actually, the foggy place is where one learns to embrace the challenge of life and say, "This is my paradise," and the bright sunny place is one where actually everybody's in the shadows, and they don't really know where other people happen to be. Iran, of course, as we were saying, is the center of a very precise sense of paradise. And that's almost a place we have to leave behind in order to come to a more lived sense of paradise. In other words, paradise is often in the head there more than in the world. There's one paradise in the head of the mullahs; there's another in the head of many citizens. But how can you make the actual streets through which you walk places of possibility?

James Shaheen: I'm tempted to read something that you wrote about the fog in Varanasi. Somehow or another, being in the unknown is a better and more fulfilling place to be. You write, "It was easy now in this half known realm, and a candlelit back alley way would be the only true home—the deepest paradise—we could ever hope to find."

Pico Iyer: Thank you, that's the last line in the book and a summation if there is one. What I didn't include in the book is I remember one day I was walking down to the ghats at the holy river, the Ganges in Varanasi. Urban India can be a psychedelic Hieronymus Bosch world with all the world and all its contradictions put together, and nowhere more so than Varanasi. There are bodies burning on one side and people performing Hindu ceremonies on the other and everything in human existence compacted in this very small space. As I was walking down to the river, suddenly, out of nowhere, appeared two monks in Tibetan robes. One was Karma Rinpoche, and the other was Nicholas Vreeland, the first Westerner in Tibetan history to be in charge of a Tibetan monastery in southern India. I'm a Hindu entirely of Indian descent, but I was freaked out by the chaos and intensity of Varanasi: What do I do with all these contradictions and this noise and this fury? I remember distinctly, Nicky appeared next to me and said, "Isn't this glorious? Isn't this wonderful? This is what life is all about. This is human existence." Both he

Tricycle Talks

“Searching for Paradise”

Episode #82 with Pico Iyer

January 11, 2023



and Rinpoche were just exalting in this human swell. It was a bit like a wake-up call for me to say, "Don't run away from this reality. This reality is where we have to find our paradise. This is what we have to work with. And this is what I have to train my eyes, my mind, my soul, my being to appreciate as the best possibility I could find. One of the things I found in Varanasi was that the city of death is a city of joy. As devout Hindus are carrying dead bodies to be burned along the side of the Ganges and committed to the holy waters, they're not despairing. They're in a state of exaltation and gratitude that they have the chance to commit the decaying body to the holy waters. E. M. Forster said, "Death destroys us, but the idea of death saves us." In other words, we have to make our peace with death, another lesson that the pandemic really brought home to us. And so Varanasi, the city of death, seemed the appropriate place to end the book and the appropriate place for me to find what I could trust as a viable paradise, not on the far side of reality, but right at the heart of it. So I suppose my feeling is not just that paradise has to be in the middle of life, but it also has to exist in the face of death. I don't trust a paradise that writes death out of the equation because, as the Buddha taught, death is the one inarguable fact of life. During the pandemic, as I was spending long, uninterrupted months at my desk, which is a rare blessing, and I was thinking back on almost 50 years of crisscrossing the globe and 30 years or more of spending time around monasteries, I was thinking, as so many of us did, How do I live in this world of uncertainty, and how do I find joy and wonder in the midst of this uncertainty? That was the koan that the pandemic presented to us, but actually, that's what life presents to us because we're always living in a state of uncertainty. And that made me try not to look away from death because it was knocking on the door. And I was spending long periods with my mother who did die, though not of the virus, during the pandemic. How can we affirm life and throw our arms around it, even as so much is falling away? As I say that I realize this is the theme of when you and I spoke last three years ago, because I wrote a book about Japan and impermanence and how impermanence moves us to cherish what we have even more. It's not a cause of sadness, but it's a call to embrace this moment right now because I don't know what's

Tricycle Talks

“Searching for Paradise”

Episode #82 with Pico Iyer

January 11, 2023



going to happen tomorrow or tonight, but right now I get to talk across the waters to James and make the most of this because this is the one certainty I can hold on to for this moment.

James Shaheen: You know, your description of that extraordinary sense of overwhelm that you can get in India sometimes reminded me of a book called *Maximum City*. It was like this ever changing massive ancient city, and it can be disorienting until you let yourself go in it just as you described so beautifully. You know, I want to come back to Iran for a second because it was such a beautiful opening to the book and it set everything up. You said often that people's notions of paradise surprised you and forced you to question your own assumptions and the binaries you had taken for granted. A particularly powerful example is your conversation with your driver at the Imam Reza shrine. Can you tell us about that experience and what it taught you about the complexity of these notions of paradise?

Pico Iyer: Yes, my very first night in Iran, and I had been dreaming of going to Iran for more than 40 years, so my first night there in the holy city of Mashhad, I stole away from my driver and government-appointed guide and I went down to the hotel taxi desk in the lobby and asked if they could find me somebody to take me to the central shrine. Lo and behold, this young guy, about 30 years old, very friendly, speaking unexpectedly good English, came and he took me out into his little battered compact. We started driving through the streets that were flooded with lights and crammed with people, and he said, "Have you come for the festival?" I didn't know there was a festival, and he told me that it was the week marking the birthday of the long dead saint who slept in the middle of the shrine, and so 5 million of the Shia faithful had come from across the world from the furthest corners of Iraq and Palestine and Iran itself to mark this occasion. When we got to the great central mosque in Mashhad, which is the largest mosque in the world, and its seven beautiful marble courtyards intertwined, we could hardly move. Everywhere there were people seated on the ground, eating, sleeping, releasing doves into the blue-black skies, and they were surrounded by large video screens on which black-turbaned



ayatollahs were delivering sermons. So it was really an intense place of Islamic worship. Because my newly met taxi driver had felt that I genuinely wanted to learn about his culture, he invited me in with him to the secret shrine where the saint is buried. It was smaller than the room I'm sitting in now, absolutely jam packed. We couldn't move. We were all part of a single body. People were weeping and children were being pushed forward so they could touch the golden grills behind which the saint had been lying for 1,100 years.

At one point in this crowded room, I looked across and saw my driver, and his hand was on his heart, and he was walking backwards so he would never present his back to the long dead saint. There were tears welling in his eyes. He was just the absolute picture of Islamic piety. Now, I was very moved to witness this very devout member of Islamic faith. But when we left the shrine and walked back towards his car, he started telling me about his wife, who he said was a blonde English woman who was waiting for him and awaiting their first baby back in England. And then he told me how he had actually fled Iran paid a human trafficker \$2,500 to slip him into England, hiding out in the back of a truck, breathing through a tube so he wouldn't be detected by the authorities, and then the British government had very magnanimously given him a court-appointed solicitor and translator who had worked for three years to win him asylum in England. In other words, he was now able to live the rest of his life in England in safety. And yet so much did he miss his hometown and his mother and the mosque that every summer he slipped back into the country he had risked his life to flee in order to be with them, again, probably risking his life in reverse. And when he dropped me back at my hotel that evening, I thought nothing I thought I knew had prepared me for, as you said, this complexity and this ambiguity.

I should say at this point, I had written long articles on Iran without having been there for Time Magazine, I'd financed my first book by writing a 20-page article on Iranian history for the Smithsonian, and I'd even written a 400-page novel with scenes set in Iran. Yet I'd never been there. So I felt, "Gosh, I knew Iran quite well." And yet within 24 hours, I saw I didn't have a clue. Iran is in our headlines every day. But I had almost never heard about a really faithful Islamic soul who nonetheless didn't want to be part of this Islamic Republic. I never could

Tricycle Talks

“Searching for Paradise”

Episode #82 with Pico Iyer

January 11, 2023



remember reading about a dissident stealing back into the country from which he'd fled because a part of him missed it so much. So as you said, it was an explosion of all my certainties and my illusion of knowledge. Here I was visiting the country I really thought I knew after 20–25 years of intensive research, and I didn't know a thing. So in that very literal way, this was an introduction to the half-known world and the half-known life.

James Shaheen: So once again, you begin knowing and end up not knowing at all, a recurring theme through the book. If I remember correctly, you also took a risk in going into that room where the saint lay. Is that still correct? I mean, they said a non-Muslim may not enter under penalty of death. How seriously was I to take that?

Pico Iyer: Yes, understandably, they don't want unbelievers going to that very holy place. Traditionally, the whole complex of seven marble courtyards and the entire mosque was forbidden to believers, and 100 years ago, British travelers would disguise themselves in order to steal in. Now the mosque is open to all of us, but to some degree, that inner shrine is protected.

James Shaheen: That inner sanctum is still off limits. So in the book, you write about your own upbringing. I always like to hear about your travels. You flew back and forth between your parents' home in Southern California and a boarding school in England where you "learned freedom by mastering restraint." Can you talk more about the contrast between these experiences and how they shaped your understanding of a notion like paradise?

Pico Iyer: They certainly set into motion questions about which is the best way to navigate the world because yes, I was moving from the age of nine back and forth between these two extremes: 15th century English boarding school, where we all had to wear black gowns and go to chapel morning and evening, no girls, no freedom of movement, very classical, military, monastic kind of education, and then California in the 60s, where my parents were living, which,



as you know as a Californian, was all about liberation and the possibility of the new. So I was literally going back and forth between the distant past and a very ordered world and this wide-open horizon of possibility and future in California. I suppose as I say that, I realize I've continued that commute ever since because now I live in Japan, which I think of as a very disciplined, hierarchical structured place rooted in the distant past, and still California, which even now is much as it was in the 1960s. And so it made me just address in a dramatic way the question all of us face, which is how do we find some balance between freedom and discipline? And how do we understand sometimes freedom is best enjoyed within discipline? There's no fun in a tennis game if there isn't a net. Often, there's no beauty and poetry if there isn't a rhyme scheme or a sonnet form in which, by managing the emotions, you actually intensify them.

It was a bit like traveling in and out of *Paradise Lost* because on the one hand, here we were, within this very imprisoned place, but there was a beauty in the prison. And I know whenever I talk to monks in the Buddhist or the Christian tradition, they say, we're told what to do every minute of the day, and there's a liberty in that because we don't have agency. To go back to your question, we don't imagine we can do everything at any moment. I have a Zen friend in California who says wonderfully that the schedule is the teacher and that by bowing before this external order, that's how we actually find our freedom more than if we're just alone in the desert and we have everything in front of us. So growing up posed to me that question about the two extremes, and it became relevant because I think of the whole globe in the 21st century as a dialogue between very old cultures, such as Iran, and very new ones such as the United States, and each of them looking to the other. Each has something important to contribute. But how do we balance those two forces?

James Shaheen: Right, you know, I've read several of your books, but I never really wondered, "Why does Pico travel?" I would answer that he travels because he travels. You grew up traveling. But I would like to actually ask because you write that "a true paradise has meaning



only after one has outgrown all notions of perfection and taken the measure of the fallen world." How did you finally decide to travel the world? I don't think I've ever asked you that before.

Pico Iyer: You haven't. As you can tell, this is almost an anti-travel book. I'm going to beautiful and complicated places, Jerusalem, Sri Lanka, Kashmir, Australia. But I'm not so much interested in describing or even investigating those places as in the questions that they throw up, the larger questions that all of us have to address. In the second chapter of the book, I quote Seamus Heaney, who as he was seeing Nelson Mandela released from prison after 27 years, wrote, "Once in a lifetime, hope and history can rhyme." In other words, we all know that history has wounded us a lot and given us a crash course in reality, but we also know we can't afford to give up on hope. So how can we balance those? For me, travel is a way of exploring the issues much more dramatically than I can at home. When I'm here sitting in Japan, I pretty much know how my day is going to go. I have my own routine. And I sleepwalk through my existence a little bit. As soon as I'm in Iran or Jerusalem or Varanasi, I'm wide awake, and suddenly, I'm forced to think through these very important questions.

So I'm grateful to travel for the questions that it throws up. And I don't think that any of those questions need an answer. I think they're diminished by an answer often. But I'm glad to entertain the questions. A part of me has always been interested in the crisscrossing of cultures, which is what you witness when you're traveling. As a little boy who grew up with Indian parents and an English voice and an English birthplace and an American green card, watching a world that is getting more and more multicultural, I've been fascinated by this new globe we're creating where people have many homes and keep interacting with people from other homes. But I think at a deeper level, travel is a way for waking myself up and for confronting things that I can try to bypass, often difficult things. Two of the salient points I hope about this book about paradise are that I'm thinking about paradise in places of great conflict, often war zones, from Iran to Belfast to North Korea, to Kashmir. Secondly, the cover of the book is a picture of a graveyard in the middle of Japan at the dead of night, which is a way of saying if we're going to



think about paradise, how do we find it in the midst of the dark and in the face of death? These are things that I think about but I can't avoid when I'm on the road.

James Shaheen: OK, you said something that I want to ask about because you said hope and history can rhyme. You also say that in Kashmir, hope in history were in hourly collision, and you write about the risks of fantasies of paradise, particularly in the case of Kashmir, which you describe as being too seductive for its own good. So can you say more about how Kashmir came to occupy such a central place in the British cultural imaginaire? How has that idealization brought about violence and destruction or caused hope and history to be in hourly collision?

Pico Iyer: Thank you so much for reading this book so closely, James, and instantly stitching together the first time I mentioned hope and history in the context of Belfast with the next, which was in Kashmir. Kashmir has bewitched the British, certainly, and I think it still bewitches my relatives in India as this realm of pure mountain streams and snowcaps and meadows, flowering with saffron and all kinds of flowers. It's a promised land for Indians, as you know whenever you're watching a Bollywood movie, many of which are set in this kind of alpine landscape in Kashmir. For those reasons, the British used to escape the heat of Delhi in the summer for the cool mountain air and especially the lakes in Srinagar. And of course, everybody listening to our conversation knows that for 70 years, Kashmir has been a very violently contested place and essentially a war zone. So when I went there, not many years ago, really in the middle of the war, like every traveler through decades, I stayed on Dal Lake on a houseboat. It's truly almost as idyllic as anything I've encountered outside Iran. There you are in this very peaceful lake, and people paddle slowly past bringing you spices and beautiful woven boxes and everything you could imagine. It's so peaceful. It's just the sound of kingfishers and the clash of oars and everybody living very quietly and slowly. 10 minutes away on the other side of the lake when you get off on the shore, you're in a place of roadblocks and constant turmoil and occupation. Essentially, everyone is in a fury of resentment, either against the Indian soldiers who are there,

Tricycle Talks

“Searching for Paradise”

Episode #82 with Pico Iyer

January 11, 2023



half a million of them, or against the guerrillas who are threatening the Indian soldiers. In Kashmir, I suddenly remembered this notion from a sixth-century monk, John Cassian, who talked about *pax precarious*, in other words, precarious peace, the dangers of feeling this absolute peace and beauty while being on the lake by screening out the reality of warfare that's taking place 10 minutes away.

I sometimes feel that in Southern California too. A place like Santa Barbara, where my mother was living, couldn't be more comfortable. And it's so easy to forget that 99% of our global neighbors are living in a great state of need with no hope of peace, no shelter, no food, no water, no electricity. I think the comfortable parts of the world are ever more distant from the uncomfortable, and I experienced that very powerfully in Kashmir. So there's always the hope of reviving a natural landscape that is to this day very idyllic and paradisaical. Almost every visitor who has come to Kashmir, Western or Eastern, has said that this is paradise, these gardens, these mountains, these meadows, and the lake. But what humans do with paradise tends to be pretty infernal often. In the middle of this book is Jerusalem, which is a perfect example of the holy city that is constantly being desecrated by contested notions, conflicting notions of what is holy. So Kashmir was a way of reminding myself that when we travel, we're all finding idyllic places, suddenly we're sitting on an island in Hawai'i or we're in a beautiful hotel in Venice, and we think this is paradise. But often we're saying that only by neglecting the difficult realities outside us. So I suppose Kashmir is a paradise I don't trust, but if I found paradise in the middle of New York City or Varanasi, I would trust it much more because it's come out on the other side of experience. It's not a blinding to experience. It's an accepting of what is.

James Shaheen: That makes me think of two things. I don't know if you saw *White Lotus*. The first season is set in Hawai'i, and of course, it's anything but paradise. There are humans there. It also reminds me of the time I spent in Ladakh. I found that a magnificent place. The landscape is breathtaking. And yet every now and then we would be stopped at not a border crossing but an internal checkpoint, and you got the feeling that underneath all of this, something was



simmering. It's not a lush paradise. It's just a stunning landscape, and you know that you're not seeing what's simmering underneath. It seems to be coming up now in current Indian politics and the new state that was created.

Pico Iyer: Well, as you know, I have a chapter on Ladakh, and I would agree with you. I think it's really among the most beautiful and transporting, clarifying places I've ever been, and of course, it's still administered by Kashmir. And as you say, there are the Indian Army encampments everywhere you go. But the other part of the Ladakh experience that shocked me is if this is paradise, and it sometimes can be as a relatively unthreatened Himalayan Buddhist landscape, what am I doing here? And what can I bring to it? And am I not the serpent? Every traveler, when she finds a paradise, has two thoughts. The first is, how do I keep it a paradise by keeping everybody else out and not telling friends about it? And the second is, how can I rise to the challenge or invitation of paradise by being pure myself? Am I not likely to violate it? And if Ladakh has a relatively calm, self-sufficient culture that's developed over centuries, which I believe it has, am I not a threat to it? And is it not far better off without me? I think the Ladakhis would have a much more practical and real-world response, which is that they have something to gain from me, at least financially.

But as a visitor, whenever you come upon an idyllic place, you're unsettled by the question that asks of you. If this really is a paradise and has so much to teach us, what do we have to give it in return, and how can we, as travelers, be something other than parasites? And so to go to your earlier question, when I do travel, I think the places I visit are asking questions of me. But they're also asking the essential question of am I doing good or bad by being here? I'm glad that travel itself has acquired a conscience in the course of my lifetime. More and more of us are thinking for environmental reasons but also for cultural reasons, maybe it would be better for us to stay at home. James and Pico have had wonderful times in Ladakh and have probably told our friends to go there. But we have to tread lightly when we're there because otherwise, it won't be the Ladakh that we love for very long.



James Shaheen: You mentioned Jerusalem, and you write extensively about your travels to Jerusalem, which you describe as "a riot of views of paradise overlapping at crooked angles." Can you say more about your experiences in Israel and what they taught you about notions of paradise?

Pico Iyer: It's no coincidence that Jerusalem is right at the center of this book. It's the middle chapter. And it's also no coincidence that right after Jerusalem, there's more and more of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, who I think is addressing the Jerusalem question and giving us a way beyond our divided world. But, of course, Jerusalem has always been known as the Holy City that's always in the state of war because it's holy and because the three great monotheisms all with their conflicting views are within 300 meters of one another at the center of the city. But beyond that, what struck me, what hit me even more forcibly on encountering in the flesh is that each of those great faiths is fighting within itself. The Shia and Sunni are always at one another's throats. Ultra-orthodox Jews are spitting on the faces of their secular brothers, and the secular brothers are provoking them. And right at the center of Jerusalem in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, which for many people is one of the holiest places in Christendom where Jesus, some believe, was buried, six different Christian orders share the same space and are locked into the church every day, and they're always at one another's throats hitting each other with brooms. The Greek Orthodox are right next to the Franciscans, and if the Franciscans go one centimeter over their boundaries, there's almost literal warfare between them. So they believe in the same God, and yet, as I say in that chapter, even in my lifetime, the Pope was not allowed to pray in the holiest space in Christendom because of the divisions within Christendom.

So Jerusalem presents the human tangle, as we were saying, what humans do with the notion of paradise, which is nearly always about discord and dissension. It presents it in its most extreme form. And yet Jerusalem remains one of the most magnetic places I've ever been. I'm not a Christian or a Muslim or a Jew. And yet sometimes I'll be walking down the street in Japan

Tricycle Talks

“Searching for Paradise”

Episode #82 with Pico Iyer

January 11, 2023



or California, and I'll literally feel pulled towards Jerusalem, so charismatic a space. When I was there, every day at 4 in the morning, before the light came up, I would go to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, which really exerts this powerful magnetism on me as on Melville and many other people, and I would just sit there. To this day, as I'm talking to you now, I can feel what it is to sit in this little broken chapel, the ragged stone shelf, nothing there, and somehow, I was so moved by that, really almost to tears. As somebody who's not Christian, it just devastated me spiritually and emotionally. So there's something very real there. But what humans do with that reality, of course, tends to be a desecration or cannot be at the same level as the reality itself. We diminish it in some ways. And so Jerusalem is this beautiful paradox at the center of the world, the center of our thinking, about what do we do with the promise that's been given us. The Dalai Lama would call it potential. Christians would call it grace. But whatever word you use for it, we have been given the chance to do something with our lives and with the world. We so often make a mess of it. And Jerusalem asks us how are we going to try to do something better with it, even though the people of Jerusalem so far haven't seemed to solve that question.

James Shaheen: It's funny, you're not Christian, you're not Jewish, you're not Muslim, and yet you write that you were catching passion like a fever. So Jerusalem has its pull. You describe many of the fights between traditions and within them, and you write of the city as "a parable that had turned into a cautionary tale, a warning about what we do when we're convinced we know it all." That, for me, was in many ways, the essence of the book: thinking we know it all as the pitfall. Do you want to say something about that?

Pico Iyer: You said it beautifully. I think at the beginning of this conversation, I was saying that seems to be the affliction more than ever today in the age of Google and in the age of dogma and our sense that we know it all. And the real world, and this is what travel gives me, is a reminder that we don't know the first thing about anything, including even the places we think we know about, in my case, Iran. When you were talking about Jerusalem and catching passion like a

Tricycle Talks

“Searching for Paradise”

Episode #82 with Pico Iyer

January 11, 2023



fever, as a traveler, I tend to be fairly detached. I'm an observer. So I go places, and I'm taking notes, and then coming back and writing about them for other people who haven't necessarily been there. And yet, in spite of all the divisions in Jerusalem, there's something so powerful about the stones and about that light that I couldn't be detached and unaffiliated. And even though I didn't have a single place of worship to which I was drawn, maybe for that reason, I was drawn to all the places of worship, and in the same day I would go to the Western Wall and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and then would try to get to the Muslim shrine, though I couldn't usually. But nonetheless, I couldn't remain detached there. And that was a good reminder to me that we're all implicated and need to be involved.

James Shaheen: Despite all of the conflict, you also found it to be a place of great hope. I think what you're talking about, the inspiration you get there, I suppose that's what gave you the hope that you felt about the city.

Pico Iyer: Yes. Hearing you say that makes me think that as individuals, all of us have the capacity to be moved, and in fact, to be transformed. And we all know that because there are many things that move us in our lives. But as soon as we try to consolidate it or put it into a theory or an ideology, then there's an us versus them. If people from 50 different faiths walk the streets of Jerusalem together, each one of them would very likely be moved by something there. But then we start to say "I am this and this" or "I believe this and this" and suddenly we're divided. I think I wrote this book very much in response to a world that's ever more diverse to ask what unites us and how ideology pushes us apart. But human experience brings us together. And again, the pandemic couldn't have been a more powerful reminder of that, because at some level, almost all the people on the planet were facing some of the same fears and anxieties and challenges through the pandemic. And the virus, as we said before, like a forest fire, doesn't discriminate between Christian, Muslim, Jew or Republican and Democrat. It's an equal opportunity employer. All of that, I think, was a useful bracing lesson: that I don't feel that the



explanations that we put upon the world are very helpful. But I do think our humility before it, which all of us have to experience, is what brings us together. All of us are to some extent defenseless before a hurricane or typhoon or tsunami, or real life and death.

James Shaheen: Right, we're back to the question of agency again and the vastness of the world and our very small place in it. You certainly went to difficult places, I mean, Iran, Kashmir, Jerusalem, and also Sri Lanka. I was especially interested in that since a few years ago before the troubles started again, I spent a nice three weeks there. You write that what brought you to Sri Lanka was something very private: you wanted to see the place that had overwhelmed the 20th-century Trappist monk, Thomas Merton, whom you read daily. First, how did you develop this fascination with Thomas Merton, and second, what brought him to Sri Lanka?

Pico Iyer: My fascination with him is because he's so human and because he speaks to what we were saying about Jerusalem. He's so drawn to the divine, to the possible, to his deeper nature. And yet he's so eloquent about all the ways he betrays himself and the divine. In some ways, he's a hero monk for people in every tradition because he voices so beautifully both who we could be and who we are and the way that they're often at odds with one another. What brought him to Sri Lanka was in the final month of his life he made at long last his trip to Asia, and he spent much of it up in the Himalayas, talking to the Dalai Lama and learning from other Tibetan teachers. He was so grateful to encounter Buddhism in the flesh. The Dalai Lama has spoken movingly about how much he learned from Thomas Merton and how suddenly, the doors to Christianity were opened to him by meeting Merton in 1968. And then after being in India, and on his way to a conference in Calcutta, where he would die four days later, he came to Sri Lanka, he saw the Buddhas in Polonnaruwa. In front of what is sometimes described as the Buddha on his deathbed and his disciples standing before him, just looking at the faces of the Buddha and the people around the Buddha, he found the mystery, the koan that he'd always been looking for. Again, he wasn't looking for answers. He said beautifully that "the substance of silence is worth more than



the answer to any question." But somehow looking at those faces, he had a thunderbolt of realization, and it was very moving because four days later, he died, apparently electrocuted by a fan in Bangkok, which was his final place, one hour after he gave a talk on monasticism and Marxism. But the reason that I have Thomas Merton and the Dalai Lama at the heart of this book was that they seem to me both true men of faith, because he was so open to every other faith: Thomas Merton, after 27 years in a Trappist monastery, understanding that he could learn something significant by seeking out the places of Buddhism. He was correct in that understanding because Sri Lanka and the Buddhas gave him something he'd never got in a lifetime of very serious Catholic devotion, and the Dalai Lama, on the other side of things, knowing that as the first Dalai Lama to travel the world, he can learn from every tradition and not think Buddhism is the only way. He often says it's not the best way and just as each medical system has something to offer, so does each religious tradition and it's not as if one is better than the other, just each may be appropriate or more appropriate to different people.

The fact that Thomas Merton and the Dalai Lama met in the last month of Merton's life is also so moving and affirming. These two great religious explorers of the 20th century met and enriched one another's understanding of the world. I just came upon a wonderful sentence by a Jesuit Father who attended an interfaith conference. He said, "My gosh, these Buddhists are going to make a Christian of me yet." I'm sure many Buddhists have found that Christians can make them deeper, richer Buddhists. In fact, I think the Dalai Lama would say that of his encounters with Merton. So in an evermore divided world, I really get more light than ever from people like Thomas Merton and the Dalai Lama, who realize that the more deeply committed you are to one tradition, the more you can learn and be open to every other. I think that's really what we need. But when we speak about paradise, I suppose for me the central line in this entire book comes from Eido Roshi, the Japanese teacher in the US, talking about the crucifixion of Christ and looking at the people crucified and telling his Western students, "In your struggle is your paradise." I love that sentence. And Thomas Merton said, "To try not to suffer is to suffer." We increase our suffering by trying to run away from suffering. So what I like about Eido Roshi



is part of the depth of that statement but also that the Japanese Zen teacher would be drawing wisdom from the Christian story. That seemed to me a fitting climax that goes with Thomas Merton and the Dalai Lama.

James Shaheen: It's impossible not to be moved when you see those statues at Polonnaruwa. It's just remarkable. And you quote Thomas Merton. He was so deeply moved and he admired "the silence of the extraordinary faces, the great smiles, huge and yet subtle, filled with every possibility, questioning nothing, knowing everything, rejecting nothing. There is no puzzle, no problem, and really no mystery. I know and have seen what I was obscurely looking for." That was such a beautiful quote, and it ties so closely to what you're talking about: "I know and have seen what I was obscurely looking for." I just found that remarkable.

Pico Iyer: I did, too. And yet part of me also feels that Thomas Merton was the patron saint of restlessness. One reason he holds me but so many of us, I think, is he was so true to the moment. He would find a revelation, and the next day, he would find something else. In other words, he was always on the move in some ways. And so I'm not 100% convinced that he could have lived with that realization, or held to it beyond the two months that follow. That's what gives a truthfulness to it also, that we find a revelation, but three days later, maybe it's refined or upended by the next. Thomas Merton is really a guiding spirit in this book, and I almost began the book with a line of his, which I think he says, "Paradise is everywhere if only we have the eyes to see it." But he also said something which is more apropos to these difficult places I traveled, which is something like "The only way to paradise is through hardship and loneliness." He knew there were no shortcuts in the inner life, in the spiritual life, and that the biggest danger was to reach too quickly or to assume that we had found paradise. I think he would bring that same rigor to himself. It's best not to assume too quickly: "Oh, I found the meaning of life, or I found the way of truth," but to still remain in the state of openness. I like that stress on hardship and loneliness.



James Shaheen: Right. I think that he was moved to write that while he was watching those. And you're right, insight after a while grows stale, because it's true in that moment, and it's not anything fixed that we hold to. You wrote something that reminded me a little bit of that line. You say, "As I came back from Sarnath, I decided I would no longer seek out holy places in the city of temples. I would just let life come to me and all its happy confusion and find the holiness in that. I sat where I was along the river and watched the carnival play out." It's a similar sentiment, I think. Is that true?

Pico Iyer: It is true. That's the culmination of the book. That's the most important sentence in it. It arises from two things: first, that as many people listening to this conversation will know, six miles from the mad intensity and carnival of Varanasi is Sarnath, where the Buddha delivered his first discourse. When I was in Varanasi, the Dalai Lama was giving a series of talks in Sarnath. And so when I went to Sarnath one day by bicycle rickshaw from Varanasi, the Dalai Lama was talking on the *Bodhisattva's Way of Life*. It struck me that the bodhisattva by definition, and maybe His Holiness, the Dalai Lama too, is somebody whose life project is to walk away from paradise back toward the rest of us to help us in any way they can. And I cite in that chapter a moment when I was sitting in on an audience that His Holiness was having with a Korean man. The Korean person was so moved to see the Dalai Lama and said, "I don't want to go to the Pure Land. I want to serve." And of course, the Dalai Lama lives that in every breath. You can see it. So to go to Sarnath in the middle of the chaos of Varanasi, and hear about the *Bodhisattva's Way* and to think that the bodhisattva is committing himself to return to the real world and away from whatever notional paradise he or she might have found is really the best lesson that many of us could find. Certainly, it was a lesson that I needed to find: Don't start looking for paradise anywhere. If you're going to find it, find it right in the middle of this crazy carnival that is Varanasi. I remember I once heard Joseph Campbell say something like "Nirvana is the world seen without fears and longings." Paradise is the place we find when we're no longer longing for



paradise or searching for it. And so I was so grateful that in the great Hindu holy city, I chanced to hear a great Buddhist teacher reminding me, "Don't look anywhere other than right here, right now for whatever you want to find."

James Shaheen: You know, the Dalai Lama figures into your work and your thinking and your life so much. You've had such a long relationship with him. I suppose that continues in your thinking and your writing, the influence he's had in shaping your view of how to live a life.

Pico Iyer: Absolutely, especially because I had the chance 10 times to travel with him across Japan by his side, literally every minute of the day. So eight hours every day, day after day after day, driving across Japan, stopping off at the convenience store with him to buy little cans of hot tea and having lunch with him and sitting in on all his private audiences. So beyond all, as you say, his formal teachings, just the way of how to be in the world and how to respond to a truck driver when he comes into the convenience store. If you're the Dalai Lama, you greet him with a warm hand. After 48 years of talking and traveling with him, he influences me so much, of course. And what moves me about that is, as you know, I'm not a Buddhist, but I can learn so much from this open-hearted, open-minded Buddhist teacher. It was interesting, during the pandemic, I did two events with His Holiness on Zoom, one in the summer of 2020 and one in the summer of 2021. And at this time when so many people were in such an acute state of anxiety and fear, he was so calm and was reminding us of the deep Buddhist truth: This is the state of life. This is the life we're signed on to. There's no running away from it. And we're always in a state of uncertainty, as I said before, and we have to find our calm and our compassion in the thick of things, as he does so preeminently. What speaks to the whole world about the Dalai Lama is precisely the fact that he's not on a mountaintop and he's not sequestered in the monastery every day. Most of the time, there he is in Belfast and Jerusalem and Times Square and these places of great difficulty and confusion because that's where he has something most to give and that's where people are in crying need, and the monk's job, and probably all our

Tricycle Talks

“Searching for Paradise”

Episode #82 with Pico Iyer

January 11, 2023



jobs, is not in secluding ourselves in quiet contemplation to find the meaning of life or the meaning of paradise but to be right in the heart of things offering what we can, and that the Dalai Lama will spend most of his life actually traveling and traveling to really difficult and contested places is, I suppose, a lesson for me and for all of us.

James Shaheen: Speaking of difficult and contested places, throughout your time in Sri Lanka, you came face to face with killer bees, snakes, temple alarms, a treacherous staircase, and an almost disastrous midnight drive, which really got me on the edge of my seat, although I knew you survived. You write that Sri Lanka "owed much of its sorrow to its centuries-old status as an earthly paradise, and it has been a place of contention for two millennia." Can you say more about this history of contention? I mean, I was there when it was more peaceful, and this is just so heartbreaking.

Pico Iyer: Can I ask what year you were there?

James Shaheen: It was, I believe, in 2017, just before all of this began to unravel.

Pico Iyer: Yes, so a few years after peace had ostensibly broken out and the big civil war seemed to have subsided. So you were there at a good propitious time. But yes, precisely the fact that it's often been associated with paradise and seems so idyllic is the reason that the British and the Portuguese and the Dutch and every last person has gone there. I think I describe it as a jewel in a rusty case with all these fans reaching out to grab the jewel and scratching themselves and damaging everyone else in the process. And just as you said, as with Kashmir, which is another delectation because it's very idyllic, it's attracted the attention of many people, and that in itself has brought conflict. That's the question that comes up to us when we visit Ladakh: It's so beautiful. How do we protect it against ourselves? How do we try not to go there so as not to tamper with that beauty and that relative peace? The other thing that I suppose since this is a

Tricycle Talks

“Searching for Paradise”

Episode #82 with Pico Iyer

January 11, 2023



conversation for Tricycle that one has to mention about Sri Lanka is that it's one of these homes of Buddhist intolerance and Buddhist fundamentalism, and it is monks who are often agitating and prosecuting the battle there and urging the government towards warfare to push out Hindu temples. It's a reminder that no tradition is immune. I know that His Holiness, the Dalai Lama has often spoken very powerfully against what's going on in Burma and presumably previously what was going on in Sri Lanka where Buddhists are the ones who are attacking anyone who doesn't hold to the notion of Buddhist chosen land, and just the notion of a Buddhist chosen land didn't make much sense to me because I would think for a Buddhist, everywhere potentially is a chosen land. It's a reminder, again, I suppose, of the importance of humility, that as travelers, we stumble into places we don't understand, and the fact that we think we understand them really gets us into trouble. You asked me the meaning of the half-known life, and part of that comes from my sense that it's when I think I know something that I get into trouble. When I'm in a state of open ignorance, not so much bad happens. It's only when I travel with that dangerous assumption of knowledge that bad things are likely to arise.

James Shaheen: Pico, we're running short on time. I have so many more questions, but I can't ask them, and I wonder if you would like to share any more thoughts with us before we sign off.

Pico Iyer: I so enjoy talking with you. I could talk to you forever. But I suppose if I were to bring this conversation to a close, I would just say that all of us are thinking about what to do with our evermore violently divided world, and all of us are thinking about how to keep hope alive in a time of climate chaos, enduring war in Sri Lanka and Ukraine and elsewhere, and terrible problems in our own society. So this is just one person's attempt in the middle of the pandemic by traveling across the world to address those two questions and to try to find a way out, partly by looking to guides such as the Dalai Lama, Thomas Merton, and Eido Roshi, who seemed to have looked beyond boundaries so as to offer us a way past our own prejudices and illusions.

Tricycle Talks

“Searching for Paradise”

Episode #82 with Pico Iyer

January 11, 2023



James Shaheen: Yeah, and I guess a little bit less certainty would help too, which is really something that runs through the book. It's a beautiful book and I hope our readers pick it up. Pico, it's been a pleasure. For our listeners, be sure to pick up a copy of *The Half Known Life: In Search of Paradise*, available now. Pico, thanks again.

Pico Iyer: Thank you, James. And thank you for so kindly selecting so many lovely sentences to share. Thank you for reading the book.

James Shaheen: It was a great pleasure. You've been listening to *Tricycle Talks* with Pico Iyer. We'd love to hear your thoughts about the podcast, so write us at feedback@tricycle.org to let us know what you think. If you enjoyed this episode, please consider leaving a review on Apple Podcasts. To keep up with the show, you can follow *Tricycle Talks* wherever you listen to podcasts. *Tricycle Talks* is produced by As It Should Be Productions and Sarah Fleming. I'm James Shaheen, editor-in-chief of *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*. Thanks for listening!