**Scientific and Unscientific Aspects of Buddhism: Unraveling Buddhism’s Peculiar Relationship with Western Science**

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"Do not be convinced by unconfirmed reports, by tradition, by hearsay, by scriptures, by logical reasoning, by inferential reasoning, by reflection on superficial appearances, by delighting in opinions and speculation, by the appearance of plausibility, or because you think, ‘This person is our teacher.’ But when you know for yourself, these teachings are beneficial, these teachings are without fault, these teachings would be accepted by the wise, these teachings, when fully taken up, lead to well-being, to ease, and are conductive to the good and benefit of one and all; then you should live embracing those teachings.”

—The Buddha, ‘Kalama Sutta’

**Buddhism and Science**

In the West, for most American Buddhists, it is assumed that Buddhism—as a philosophy and practice of awareness—is both psychological and scientific. Why is this so? Why would an ancient Asian religion seem to be in sync with Western science? Just what is the relationship between Buddhism and science?

**Purpose:** In 2008, Donald S. Lopez, an eminent scholar in the field of Buddhist studies, published a book entitled Buddhism and Science: A Guide for the Perplexed, in which he went to great lengths to show the religious aspects of Buddhism, by illustrating how ancient Buddhist teachings of the Buddha offer a unique perspective on human nature and the universe. The examples he provided were illuminating, and yet, their attempts were portrayed as merely reactionary (reactions to Western imperialism and modernism). On the other side of the debate, B. Alan Wallace, another preeminent Buddhist scholar, has presented Buddhist psychology—in particular its methodological approach to meditation—as an alternative to scientific materialism. So what is the relationship between Buddhism and science?

**Method:**

- The method I have employed has been New Historicism—i.e. as vast an undertaking as it might seem, the path necessary to genuinely answer the question has been to explore the history of Greek philosophy, the intellectual history of the 17th and 18th centuries, the history of Buddhism, the history of China, and the history of science from antiquity to 1700, in order to get to the bedrock of how Buddhism could appear scientific.

**Results:**

**Elements of Bean Congenial to Science:**

- The Buddha (5th-6th century B.C.E.), much like Hippocrates and the other Greek philosophers, shifted the center of his inquiry from indifferent gods to human agency, and so it is within our human agency in which we have the capacity to overcome suffering via mindfulness and meditation. As with Greek philosophy, and with modern science, Buddhism does not proceed from an assumption of theism.

- Much like John Locke (1632-1704), the Buddha posited that we only come to know reality via our five senses (actually, six senses, since the Buddha counted consciousness as a sixth sense). Unlike John Locke, and unlike the Greek philosophers, the Buddha, along with the rest of India, had meditation at his disposal, and from this was able to develop a method for directly engaging awareness, and therefore overcome suffering, which he called mindfulness.

- Buddhism is pluralistic—unlike Christianity, belief is not central to Buddhism. Historically, Theravada and Mahayana Buddhists have been able to practice together in the same monastery, and so there are several schools of Buddhism. This non-centricity of belief is evidenced by Stephen Batchelor’s recent publication of a book entitled Confession of a Buddhist Atheist.

- As opposed to monothelism (i.e. a belief in God), meditation and mindfulness provide a disprovable hypothesis which can be tested through scientific inquiry.

**Elements of Buddha Not Congenial to Science**

- The Buddha undertook solving the problem of human suffering because of the problem of reincarnation, which for India at that time was a problem of cosmic significance. It is notable that because the Buddha solved a problem of cosmic significance, he himself was deemed to be a figure of cosmic significance. Mahavira, the founder of Jainism and a contemporary of the Buddha, has a similar significance within Jainism.

- Several schools of Buddhism have a supernatural interpretation of Buddhism. In Tibetan Buddhism, for instance, figures known as bodhisattvas are beings who, after death, choose to return to earth to help humans attain enlightenment. The Dalai Lama is one such figure.

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"I will teach you the totality of life. Listen to what I say:

What, monks, is totality? It is just the eye with objects of sight, the ear and sounds, the nose and scents, the body and tactile objects, the mind and thoughts. Someone might say, ‘I reject this all. I will declare another all.’ But because that is simply a groundless assertion, such a person, when questioned, would not be able to explain, and would, moreover, meet with distress. What is the reason for that distress? Because that all is not within his or her sensorium.”

—The Buddha, “Sabba Sutta”

**Conclusion:**

Because Buddhism is an obscure religion in the West, it is generally intellectual who discover and convert to it. Most Americans convert to Buddhism as an alternative to Christianity, and so they naturally downplay the elements in Buddhism that resemble Christianity. Historically, as Buddhism has moved from continent to continent, it has always been flexible. Because belief is not central to Buddhism, per se, it is entirely possible to extract a complete, whole, and fully functional system of philosophy from Buddhism, without supernatural elements. However, there’s a strong apologetic interest for Buddhists to align Buddhism with science, since no one can deny the value of science’s methods and the progress in knowledge and technology that it has led to. This leads Westerners to think ahistorically/non-historically about Buddhism, and Western Buddhists almost unconsciously confute Buddhism and science, as if science was what was being taught in 13th century Tibet—it wasn’t.

As far as Buddhism’s contribution to psychology, the possibility that meditation and mindfulness might find mainstream success and acceptance should not be dismissed out of hand. In this situation, the Buddha might well be analogous to Pythagoras. Pythagoras believed in the divinity of number, but while his discoveries have long since been proven and accepted, few, if any, today practice his religion.

**Selected Sources**


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