

BUDDHISM: SCIENCE BETWEEN MIND AND BODY

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Abstract

Buddhism is not only a religion but also a life style of people which connect almost all the people who live peacefully. Many mindfulness therapies helped to strengthen the perception of Buddhism which is compatible with western science in the movement. Under the patronage of Dalai Lama, the Tibetan Buddhism talks about peaceful life and also it compares with the confrontation of western science and it has proved also its significance in the assumptions of scientific ideas. Religion is always compared with other religions and the same thing is done with Buddhism against the western majority religion and that is Christianity but even in that the Theravada Buddhism is found the upper level with others. The meetings between the western scientists and Dalai Lama have been organized by the Mind and Life Institute on the location in India and the USA on the topics of 'Craving, Desire and Addiction'. Buddhism spiritualism was discussed on a vast level and with those other ideologies was also discussed by western scientists and Buddhism philosophers and in that Buddhism ideologies were given respect and appraised by all. The life of Dalai Lama and his various life patterns were also discussed at a very large level. The inheritance of Buddhism and Hinduism was also discussed and many meditative understandings were also covered in this meeting. The idea of traditional Buddhist language and with that other Asian conceptual framework was also set upon the basis of examination and understanding. The aim is to define a space within which we can discover what these Buddhist and other Asian bodies of deliberation might be talking about so as to enrich and extend Western scientific understandings.

Key words: Buddhism, science, Hinduism, desire, addiction

INTRODUCTION

Buddhism has been seen, at least since the Theravada reform movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century's, as particularly compatible with Western science. The recent explosion of Mindfulness therapies has strengthened this perception. However, the 'Buddhism' which is being brought into relation with science in the context of the Mindfulness movement has already undergone extensive rewriting under modernist influences, and many of the more critical aspects of Buddhist thought and practice are dismissed or ignored. The Mind and Life Institute encounters, under the patronage of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, present a different kind of dialogue, in which a Tibetan Buddhism which is only beginning to undergo modernist rewriting confronts Western scientists and scholars on more equal terms. However, is the highly sophisticated but radically other world of Tantric thought really compatible with contemporary science? In this article I look at problem areas within the dialogue, and suggest that genuine progress is most likely to come if we recognize the differences between Buddhist thought and contemporary science, and take them as an opportunity to rethink scientific assumptions.

ENCOUNTER WITH CHRISTIANITY

Here, the encounter with Christianity, in the form of the missionary presence in Sri Lanka, was a key component. The Buddhist monks and scholars who argued against Christianity in a series of major debates, of which the most famous was that at Panadura in 1862, claimed that it was not Buddhism but Christianity that was fanciful, inconsistent, without real intellectual substance, and based on implausible myths and stories. The key speaker at Panadura was the monk-scholar Migettuwatte Gunananda. He and his colleagues argued that Buddhism, with its history of rigorous philosophical thought and its lack of an omnipotent, judgment-dispensing creator-god, had far more in common with science, which was emerging in the European context as a highly effective rival to Christianity, than with Christianity. Indeed, they suggested that Buddhism was barely a religion at all in the Western sense, but a scientifically based philosophy in its own right. As for the Western scholars and sympathizers, many of them perhaps escapees from domineering or conflicted Christian backgrounds, they were happy to collaborate in an enterprise which promised both to relativise the Church's claims to authority and to make available a new, more acceptable moral basis for contemporary life. All this involved a certain amount of side-stepping of problematic issues. Buddhist sutras might be dismissive

of the claims of a creator-god, but they had plenty of gods, spirits, and miracles, while the Buddha himself was clearly regarded by most Buddhists as far more than an ordinary human being. If part of the problem with the Christian Church was the clergy, and their claims to authority, Buddhist monks also constituted a clergy, with many of the same problematic features. But this all got fudged in various ways, and in the process (I simplify a little) a highly authoritative and dominant new version of Theravada Buddhism was created, to serve as a suitable dialogue-partner for a Western science which saw itself as empiricist and experimental, and which was only beginning to break away from the structures of Newtonian physics into the heady realms of relativity theory and quantum mechanics. This was a science confident that all the fundamental problems had been solved, and that what was left was to tidy up the details and Theravada Buddhism was positioned by its proponents, Asian and Western, as both confirmed by and confirming that confidence.

DIALOGUE BY DALAI LAMA

Perhaps the most widely-known and public context for contemporary debates in this area is that of the Mind and Life Institute dialogues presided over by His Holiness the Dalai Lama, and it is on these dialogues that I shall principally focus. These meetings between the Dalai Lama and Western scientists have been taking place now for around twenty-five years. The first meetings took place in 1987, and the most recent, in October and November 2013, was the twenty-seventh, on the subject of 'Craving, Desire and Addiction'. Initially, the meetings were mostly at Dharamsala in India, the Dalai Lama's residence in exile, but subsequent meetings have taken place at a variety of other locations in India and the USA. The participants have included a wide range of Western scientists, including physicists, psychologists, neuroscientists and biologists, as well as a number of Tibetan scholars. There have also been a number of additional associated conferences and other events, and a European branch of the Mind and Life Institute has also been created.

The Mind and Life Institute meetings are certainly much more irenic and collaborative events than the late-nineteenth-century debates in Sri Lanka. In the Mind and Life Institute meetings, there is no longer a need for Gunananda's forceful claim for Buddhism to be taken seriously in the face of the supposedly authoritative claims of Western missionaries. In contrast, we see a group of Western *scientists* engaged in a respectful discussion with a Buddhist spiritual leader, in which it is presumably taken for granted that what he might have to say in relation to their specialist fields is worthy of serious consideration. Of course, there are plenty of practicing scientists around today who would still be dismissive of such dialogues, but the apparent level of acceptance of Buddhist thought within the wider field of Western science, compared to even twenty or thirty years ago, is striking.

NEUROSCIENCE AND CONTEMPLATIVE SCIENCE

We can explain the limited nature of much of the present dialogue fairly simply. On the Western side, while there is certainly sympathy for aspects of the Buddhist tradition, most scholars are still working within established paradigms that allow little or no space for central assumptions of Buddhist thought. On the Buddhist side, the principal participants are no longer Westernized supporters of a simplified, demythologized Theravada, but proponents of the much more complex, sophisticated and, importantly, largely not modernized Tibetan tradition. The proponents of the Tibetan tradition neither desire nor need to concede much to Western modes of thought, particularly given the high profile of and level of public respect for the Dalai Lama himself. The Dalai Lama is undoubtedly a complex person who lives many different roles, which including that of the simple Buddhist monk, in the service of the Tibetan people and of Tibetan Buddhism. An important part of his background, however, is that he is someone with a thorough and extensive training in the arguments and positions of Mahayana philosophy, as presented by the Gelugpa School, of which he is the leading proponent. He is an exceedingly trained debater and logician who has learned to think within the categories of a school of thought which arguably offers a much deeper challenge to the assumptions of Western science than the rationalized Theravada of the early twentieth century. And while the Dalai Lama is certainly paying concentration in Western science, he does not, as we have seen from the quote before, start from the assumption that science is a concluding source of authoritative knowledge. It is complicated to be sure from the published versions of the dialogues how much the Dalai Lama actually understands of Western science, but it is pretty comprehensible that he sees it as far from perfect, and as in need of transform and revision.

MOVING THE DEBATE FORWARD

The rationale of the rest of this article is to argue that there is, or could be. Here I think it is useful to look at some of the contributions to the deliberate within and outside the Mind and Life Institute that have received less attention in recent years than the fMRI scans of meditating yogis and similarly high tech projects. It will also help if we start by pluralizing, and by loosening up, on both sides, Buddhist and scientific. On the

Buddhist side, I have emphasized that one of the differences between the early twentieth century conversation, which recognized - one might say-many of our default assumptions about Buddhism and science, and those at the Mind and Life Institute is that the Buddhism that is occupied is actually quite different. In fact, even within Tibetan Buddhism, there is a whole range of positions and approaches, and the Dalai Lama's Gelugpa scholasticism is only one of these.

In addition, as critical voices in spiritual studies have been pointing out for some time, terms such as Buddhism and Hinduism are already inherently problematic. These are Western terms, not indigenous terms, and they obtain from a Western need to classify the rest of the world in Western categories, and an Asian willingness to accept the terms of that project. The diminution of Buddhism to an empiricist project based around meditative understanding has been particularly questioned; Robert Sharf's contributions in this area, which radically questioned the whole role of experience and meditation within Buddhism, are especially significant. Sharf, in seeking to establish an important and suitable point, perhaps took the disagreement a little too far. Meditation may not be anything like as central to Buddhist practice as Westerners typically suppose, but it does take place, and it has played a significant historical function in the development of Buddhist viewpoint and practice.

THE PROBLEM OF THE SELF

All this allows us to treat both sides in the debate as more watery and as more situated in the ongoing lives, and the social and cultural contexts, of the participants. What this does, it is suggested, is to create an intermediate space in which a more realistic dialogue is possible. However that statement assumes something about what a 'realistic dialogue' might be. Personally, I would like both a more provisional, tentative, good-humored, and genuinely experimental, approach on both sides. I also believe that what we might call traditional Asian thought has legitimate potential for significant revision and additional room of Western science. In 'traditional Asian thought' I would include not only the various Buddhist traditions, but also the very substantial material on related ideas within the Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava traditions of South Asia, and in the Chinese traditions of Daoism practice.

One critical issue that has been ignored within much of the contemporary scientific work on neuroscience, meditation, and Mindfulness might provide an important preliminary point for such revision and extension. This is the question of the self, of personal identity, and of the relationship between the individual and the wider universe. This is a key concern within Buddhist thought, and in somewhat different ways it has also been a key apprehension for Hindu and Daoism thinkers, who have their own ways of relativising the ordinary self in relation to more inclusive and interconnected conceptualizations. Here is where I find some basic problems with the more conventional versions of the neuroscientific studies of Buddhism. Neuroscience is essentially a study of brains-individual brains. Now, at some level, anyone who has had any serious involvement with Buddhist thought knows that there is a problem for Buddhism in treating individuals as segregates. Whatever Buddha hood might be, it evidently involves a thoroughgoing awareness of radical interdependence. However, as human beings who have learned to think of ourselves as individuals, and particularly as citizens of a Western, and increasingly global, civilization in which the autonomous individual human being is a basic datum of our experience, it is very complicated not to take the separateness of the individual for granted in all kinds of ways. I have suggested elsewhere that the same concern can easily surface in relation to modernist styles of meditation, and to the Mindfulness-based therapies that obtain from them. Here the ecological and 'enactive' approach to consciousness developed by Varela, Thompson, Rosch, and others arguably provides much more substantial and plausible ground for productive interface with Buddhism and other Asian traditions of thought than the empiricist and individualistic assumptions of much neuroscience and cognitive science.

CONCLUSION

How conceivable these particular conjectures might be is another question, and obviously I am only summarizing them very briefly in this article. What I think they summit to, however, along with some of the other work I have been discussing, is the possibility of a level of examination that stands in some respect outside both traditional Buddhist language, and other related Asian conceptual frameworks, on the one hand, and the default assumptions of scientific materialism, on the other. The aim is to define a space within which we can explore what these Buddhist and other Asian bodies of thought might be talking about so as to enrich and extend Western scientific understandings, rather than simply reducing them in order to fit in with what we think we already know.

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