

BUDDHISM AND SCIENCE, MIND AND BODY

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Abstract: *Buddhism has been seen, at least since the Theravāda reform movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as particularly compatible with Western science. The recent explosions of Mindfulness therapies have 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.*

Keywords: Buddhism; Science; Mind and Life Institute; Tantra; Consciousness, etc.

1. INTRODUCTION

Degree of compatibility with modern science was quite specific. It was an alliance between Buddhist reformers based initially in Sri Lanka, and Western scholars and Buddhist sympathizers, from Europe and North America. The initial context in which people in the West came to think of Buddhism as a rational philosophy with a high degree of compatibility with modern science was quite specific. It was an alliance between Buddhist reformers, based initially in Sri Lanka, and Western scholars and Buddhist sympathizers, from Europe and North America.

The Sinhalese Buddhist reformers were essentially engaged in a struggle against colonialism. An important part of that struggle involved establishing the right of Buddhist thought to be taken seriously, on a par with Western modes of thinking and if possible as superior to them. The reformers aimed to reverse the routine European dismissal of Asian thought as fanciful, inconsistent, based on myth and story and without real intellectual substance. 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 oppressive 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 provide a new, more acceptable moral basis for contemporary life.

2. NEUROSCIENCE AND CONTEMPLATIVE SCIENCE: THE STAND-OFF

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 unmodernised 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 (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 *ahāyāna* philosophy, as presented by the Gelugpa School, of which he is the leading proponent. He is a highly 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 interested in Western science, he does not, as we have seen from the quote before, start from the assumption that science is a final source of authoritative knowledge. It is difficult to be sure from the published versions of the dialogues how much the Dalai Lama actually understands of Western science, but it is pretty clear that he sees it as far from perfect, and as in need of change and revision.

3. MOVING THE DEBATE FORWARD

The purpose 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 debate within and outside the Mind and Life Institute that have received less attention in recent years than the **MRI** 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 dialogues, which established 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 engaged 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 religious 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 derive 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 reduction of Buddhism to an empiricist project based around meditative experience 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 pertinent.

4. THE PROBLEM OF THE SELF

All this allows us to treat both sides in the debate as more fluid and as more situated in the ongoing lives, and the social and cultural contexts, of the participants. What this does, I suggest, 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, playful, and genuinely experimental, approach on both sides. I also feel that what we might call traditional Asian thought has genuine potential for critical revision and extension 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 Daoist practice. One critical issue that has been ignored within much of the current scientific work on neuroscience, meditation, and Mindfulness might provide an important starting 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 concern for Hindu and Daoist thinkers, who have their own ways of relativising the ordinary self in relation to more inclusive and interconnected conceptualizations.

5. CONCLUSIONS

How plausible these particular conjectures might be is another question, and obviously I am only summarizing them very briefly in this article. What I think they point to, however, along with some of the other work I have been discussing, is the possibility of a level of analysis 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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