

“Overlapping Worlds: What do Buddhism and science have to offer each other?” **BYLINE: By B. Alan Wallace**

Buddhism, like science, presents itself as a body of systematic knowledge about the natural world. It posits a wide array of testable hypotheses and theories concerning the nature of the mind and its relation to the physical environment. These theories have allegedly been tested and experientially confirmed numerous times over the past 2,500 years, by means of duplicable meditative techniques. In this sense, Buddhism may be characterized as a form of empiricism, rather than transcendentalism. Of course, there are many divergent Buddhist views about the nature and significance of specific contemplative insights; but the theories and discoveries of science have also been open to varying interpretations over time. A major difference between science and Buddhism is that scientists largely exclude subjective experience from the natural world, and attribute causal efficacy only to physical phenomena. Buddhism, in contrast, takes subjective mental phenomena at least as seriously as objective physical phenomena, and posits a wide range of interdependent causal connections between them.

To a much greater extent than modern psychology, for example, Buddhism presents rigorous means of investigating the causes of suffering and happiness. It is intent not only on counteracting suffering once it has arisen, but on identifying and counteracting the causes of suffering before it arises. All conditioned phenomena arise from multiple causes, and the central theme of Buddhism is to identify especially the *inner* causes of joy and sorrow, for they have been found to be more crucial than *outer*, physical causes. This is perhaps the most scientific aspect of Buddhism, and it addresses issues in the realm of human experience and consciousness itself that have been largely overlooked by modern science.

One distinction commonly made between science and the contemplative traditions is that science entails collective knowledge, whereas contemplative insights are always private and cannot be shared. As the sociobiologist Edward Wilson points out, “One of the strictures of the scientific ethos is that a discovery does not exist until it is safely reviewed and in print.” In other words, a discovery is not accepted within a scientific community until it has been reviewed and published. But a genuine discovery, of course, takes place well before it is published! And even after it is published, a scientific discovery can normally be validated only by a relatively small number of experts within a specific field of research. Other scientists and the general public will, for the most part, accept discovery on the basis of their faith in the experts.

This situation is not so different from discoveries made by Buddhist contemplatives. The discoveries are made in terms of their own firsthand experience. They may then be reported either verbally or in print, and their claims are subject to peer review by their fellow contemplatives, who may debate the merits or defects of the reported findings. Critiques by anyone other than lifelong contemplatives are taken no more seriously than critiques of scientific theories by non-scientists.

But saying that Buddhism includes scientific elements by no means overlooks or dismisses the many explicitly religious elements of the tradition. As the late paleontologist Stephen J. Gould said of religion, Buddhism is very much concerned with human purposes, meaning, and value. But, like science, it is also concerned with understanding the realms of sensory and mental experience, and it addresses the questions of what the universe, including both objective and subjective phenomena, is composed of and how it works. Buddhism also addresses questions about the meaning and purpose of life, our ultimate origins and destiny, and our experiences of inner life. But the fact that Buddhism includes elements of religion is not enough to simply categorize it as a religion, any more than it would make sense to call it a science. To study this discipline objectively requires that we loosen our grip on familiar conceptual categories and be prepared to confront something radically unfamiliar to the West that may challenge some of our deepest assumptions. In the process, we may review the status of science itself, in relation to the metaphysical axioms on which it is based.

Indeed, Buddhism does not define *itself* as a religion or as a science, and traditionally it has made no distinction between religious truths and scientific truths. His Holiness the Dalai Lama, who has taken a leading role in dialogues between Buddhism and science, has repeatedly claimed that if compelling scientific evidence refutes any Buddhist assertion, Buddhists should abandon their own discredited assertion. This attitude stems, presumably, from the Buddhist belief that sentient beings are fundamentally subject to suffering due to ignorance and delusion, and the way to freedom is by coming to know reality as it is.

If scientific research illuminates errors in Buddhist doctrine, then, Buddhists should be grateful for such assistance in their own pursuit of truth. In other words, the Dalai Lama is flatly rejecting the notion that Buddhism and science are like apples and oranges. And he equally rejects the idea that Buddhist assertions are not subject to verification or refutation.

The way forward for Buddhism and science is through mutually respectful dialogue and collaboration in both empirical and theoretical research. This entails reaching out across disciplines and cultures to increase mutual understanding of areas of common interests. In terms of the interface between Buddhism and science, we must be self-conscious of the assumptions we bring to Buddhist studies, while entertaining the possibility of learning about the world *from* Buddhism, as opposed to studying this tradition merely as a means to learn *about* Buddhism. The aspects of Buddhism that are most inviting for such interdisciplinary inquiry are those that are accessible to empirical and analytical inquiry.

Moreover, such research will take fully into account the experiences of Buddhist practitioners, of the present and the past, and not focus on texts alone. In this way, Buddhism may be viewed as a form of “natural philosophy” —the label for early European science—challenging us to ask the deepest possible questions (as in religion), by means of rigorous logical analysis (as in philosophy), and empirical investigation (as in science). This way of grappling with Buddhist truth claims seeks not only an objective

appraisal of the textual *doctrines* of Buddhism, but also its claims of experiential *insights*. And the objective appraisal of the latter may require testing these assertions by engaging in the Buddhist practices oneself, just as one might test a scientific theory by running experiments oneself.

The scientific engagement with Buddhism can shed a fresh light on our own subjectivity, our own language, and our own categories, for example, of religion, science and philosophy. By recognizing the unique contexts of both Buddhism and science, all participants in such dialogue can begin to escape the bad habit of giving privileged status to our own preconceptions. That alone is reason enough to embark on a cross-cultural--and interdisciplinary--journey of understanding.

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