

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

Buckley L. Cloud ☞ Adviser: Dr. Scott Lowe, Philosophy and Religious Studies



"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 conducive to the good and benefit of one and all' then you should live embracing those teachings."

— The Buddha, 'Kalama Sutta'



Buddha, Shanxi Province (907-1125 CE). Photo from oup.com

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 ethnic Buddhists in the 19th and 20th centuries attempted to reconcile Buddhism with Western science. 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.



Limestone Buddha, Northern Qi dynasty (550-577CE). Image from press.uchicago.edu

Results:

Elements of Buddhism Congenial to Science:

➤ The Buddha (6th-5th 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 that 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.



John Locke, by Sir Godfrey Kneller, 1697. Collection of Sir Robert Walpole, Houghton Hall, 1779.

➤ 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-centrality of belief is evinced by Stephen Batchelor's recent publication of a book entitled *Confession of a Buddhist Atheist*.

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

Elements of Buddhism Not Congenial to Science

"Buddha Sakyamuni, Sovereign of the World, with Disciples Sariputra and Maudgalyayana," by an 18th cen. Tibetan artist. Photo from penguinclassics.com.



➤ 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.

"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 generally intellectuals 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 conflate 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.

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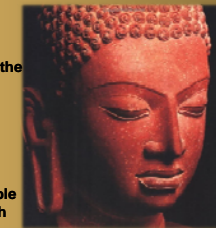
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Buddha, 4-6th century C.E., Mathura, India. Photo from oup.com.