

## A Note on the Discourse of Scientific Buddhism Today

Taken from *The Making of Buddhist Modernism* by David L. McMahan, Oxford, 2008 (p.113-116)

The discourse of scientific Buddhism, despite these somewhat inauspicious beginnings, is no less powerful now than a century ago. While the nineteenth century optimism regarding the unmitigated goodness of science is now but a distant dream, the explanatory power of science and its dominance in the arena of empirical claims of truth remain virtually unchallenged. At the same time, this discourse has changed and matured significantly in recent decades, in part because those involved in the discourse often have far greater knowledge of Buddhism, and because of the empirical component that has emerged. As Jose Cabezon notes, "a dialogue that began in broad generalities - 'Buddhism', 'science', 'universal laws' and so forth - has shifted to a more concrete conversation that is increasingly cognizant of, and more informed about, the complex internal texture of these two spheres". Two broad themes emerge in this conversation. First, there is an effort to more precisely establish complementarities between the sciences and Buddhism, either in terms of method or content. Second, there is an attempt to more precisely map out their respective spheres, often configured as the mind (Buddhism) and the material world (science). Buddhism is construed as a "science of mind" that provides special techniques for intensive analysis of cognition, emotion, and personal experience in general. It operates empirically and analytically but also intuitively and introspectively. Conventional science, in contrast, studies the world of matter quantitatively, rationally, and analytically. Science provides Buddhism with more up-to-date views of the material world, and Buddhism can provide science with not only sophisticated techniques for accessing and analyzing the mind but also humanizing ethical correctives that can infuse the potentially nihilistic and ethically problematic aspects of science with new meaning and values. While some theorists of this relationship present more sophisticated accounts than this brief generalization suggests, some version of this logic of complementarity is at work in most.

The most recent chapter in the interactions between Buddhism and science, the new forefront of the discourse of scientific Buddhism, is now the lab, where researchers hook up meditating monks to functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) machines, mapping their brain states and physiological functioning, and perform long-term studies of the health benefits of Buddhist mindfulness practices for heart patients. Although authors of these studies often voice the same vague assertions of scientific Buddhism as their predecessors, they tend to explore more specific questions related to health and psychology and, at their best, can rightly claim a far more extensive and mature understanding of both science and Buddhism.

What is the possible historical significance of this new phase of the discourse to the development of Buddhism itself? For the historian of religion, to ask whether Buddhism and science are compatible would be to pose an unwieldy question, one that posits a monolithic "Buddhism" as well as a monolithic "science," reduces Buddhism to its highly philosophical elements abstracted from any living context, and further reduces these to "general principles" that themselves have already been reinterpreted

and rendered compatible with scientific principles. Both Buddhism and science are too complex and internally variegated for such reductions to be useful. They would create an abstract Buddhism already influenced by modernist presuppositions. The wealth of scholarship on Buddhism in the last few decades has clearly demonstrated that it is too complex and diverse to be so reduced. This does not mean, however, that fruitful work cannot be done in the sciences with questions derived from Buddhist perspectives and practices - after all, much of western science has developed within the rubric of a Christian worldview. But it means that the discourse of scientific Buddhism is not the best one to inform the historian about Buddhism as a historical and cultural phenomenon, since the Buddhism in question is already reconfigured in terms of modern scientific thinking. At the same time, historians and cultural critics who rush to dismiss the discourse of scientific Buddhism as merely an orientalist or "occidentalist" representation may miss the fact that it is more than just a representation - it is a concrete and highly significant transformation of Buddhist traditions themselves. "Scientific Buddhism" is not just a western orientalist representation of the eastern Other, nor is it just a native strategy of legitimization for Asian Buddhists, though it does involve both. It is instead a part of the ongoing hybridization of certain forms of Buddhism with distinctively modern cultural formations and intellectual practices. The historical question regarding contemporary Buddhism, then, is not "Is Buddhism scientific?" but "How is Buddhism transforming itself through its engagement with science?" Rather than telling us what Buddhism "is," the discourse of scientific Buddhism itself is constitutive of novel forms of Buddhism, with shifting epistemic structures and criteria for authority and legitimacy.

An offhand comment by Daniel Goleman, a leading popularizer of research involving Buddhist meditation practices, illustrates these shifts. Discussing empirical studies of experienced meditators performing compassion (*metta*) meditation, in an interview with the popular Buddhist magazine Tricycle, Goleman reports that MRI machines showed that areas of their brains associated with joy were highly active - more than any others that had ever been measured. When asked about the significance of this, he says of traditional Buddhist approaches to overcoming *klesas*, negative psychological states: "it's beginning to look like the Buddha just might have had it right". The research itself is interesting, but from the perspective of the history of Buddhism, it is this statement that is compelling. It suggests that the epistemic authority of the *sutras*, the purported words of the Buddha (*buddhavacana*), which have been authoritative for virtually all Buddhists, is now to some extent being subsumed beneath the epistemic authority of the scientist. For we can assume that honest scientific investigation may find that in some respects the Buddha, as it were, got it wrong. This suggests that some of the tensions present in the early development of the discourse of scientific Buddhism are still at work today. While some Buddhists may simply be looking for legitimization of the dharma through science, and may lose interest in such research if science fails to deliver it, others no doubt see scientific experimentation as the ultimate arbiter of what is the case and are willing to subject Buddhist claims to a non-Buddhist standard of truth. For instance, C. de Charms is frankly enthused about the possibility of using of science to mitigate internal issues in Buddhism: "by using the methods of science, methods based on commonly verifiably observations, it might be possible to start to find a similar kind of consensus regarding debated points within Buddhism, or even debated points within traditions".

That western scientists, qua scientists, are willing to subject Buddhist truth-claims to external criteria is not surprising. What is extraordinary, however, is that the fissure between indigenous modernists like Dharmapala and those maintaining a universalist discourse (in this case contemporary science) has recently been bridged by prominent Buddhists, notably the most prominent one in the world, the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, who has actively encouraged much of the aforementioned research. The Dalai Lama has repeatedly said that if there are Buddhist doctrines that are found definitively to contradict established scientific conclusions, then these doctrines must be abandoned. Indeed, he has declared some aspects of traditional Buddhist cosmology to be mistaken, though he still maintains many traditional beliefs, such as karma and rebirth. Taken at face value, if the dharma itself is subject to scientific epistemic authority, this would seem to signal a profound change in the structure of Buddhist claims to authority. There has, however, been no large-scale jettisoning of Buddhist doctrine; Buddhists have not suggested that the prescientific cosmologies and miracle stories be expurgated from the canon. Buddhism, like all religions, has certain doctrines that are beyond the possibility of discarding. No one would argue that since the third noble truth simply does not have enough scientific support, the four noble truths should be reduced to three. Rather, modernists tend either to ignore doctrines that are difficult to maintain in light of science or to reinvest them with meanings that are viable within a modern worldview. As noted, for example, many modernist Buddhist teachers present the wheel of rebirth, the traditional doctrine of the various realms into which beings are reborn, neither as obsolete nor as literal cosmology but as a psychological reality, with each realm representing a state of mind.

The discourse of scientific Buddhism, therefore, has become an important part of how Buddhists address a question that permeates religious thought in the modern world: how to decide what is to be understood as literal and what is to be reinterpreted as myth, symbol, or allegory. In some respects, this is a modern transformation of a traditional Buddhist hermeneutical issue regarding literal or allegorical meaning—indeed, the distinction was not invented by modern westerners. The contemporary hermeneutic situation is unique, however, in that for the first time, a non-Buddhist discourse is increasingly being used to decide this question.

To return to the overly simple question of whether Buddhism, in fact, is compatible with science or not—as I have suggested, a historian of religion must ask the question differently. Let us try it this way: Are there elements of Buddhism that, when taken up in the context of modern science and developed and adapted along the lines of scientific thinking, become compatible with science? Clearly, yes. This "taking up" of selected elements of a tradition in the context of another tradition is how religions develop, adapt, change, and come to occupy different ideological niches from the ones they evolved in. The taking up and development of Buddhism in the context of the aforementioned three discourses of modernity—scientific rationalism, Romanticism, and Christianity—has created a new Buddhism, a hybrid that is adapted to all three discourses and is able to both complement and criticize them.