



Buddhism and science

Buddhism is a religion that has been described as both a philosophy and a science. It is often seen as a way of life rather than a religion. Its approach can indeed be seen as 'scientific'.

The Buddha described a universe that was not created by God but that functioned according to laws of causation. Indeed, the most famous statement in all of Buddhism is not a prayer, a mantra, or a profession of faith, but a summary of the Buddha's teaching: "of those things that have causes, he has shown their causes. And he has also shown their cessation."

The Buddha understood the operations of the mind in precise detail, explaining how desire, hatred, and ignorance motivate actions that eventually result in all manner of physical and mental pain, and he set forth the practice of meditation to bring the chattering mind and the unruly emotions under control in order to reach a state of serenity.

The Buddha also analysed the physical and mental constituents that together are called the person, finding among them nothing that lasts longer than an instant. Thus, he discovered, through his analysis, that there is no self, that there is no soul, that what we call the person is but a psychophysical process, and that the realisation of this fundamental truth results in a certain liberation.

The Buddha then extended this analysis to the universe, declaring the universal truth of *pratīyasamutpāda*, dependent origination, according to which everything is interrelated, each entity connected to something, nothing standing alone, with effects depending on their causes, with wholes depending on their parts, and everything depending for its existence on the consciousness that perceives it. Yet, whether wave or particle, there is no uncertainty about the ultimate nature of reality, which the Buddha called *śūnyatā*, or emptiness.

The Buddha discovered these truths not through revelation but through investigation and analysis, testing hypotheses in the laboratory of his mind to arrive at proofs. He articulated these truths in his teachings, called the *dharma*, truths that derive not from faith, but from the Buddha's own experience. And having reached those conclusions, he did not declare them to be articles of faith, famously telling his followers: "O monks, like gold that is heated, cut, and rubbed, my words should be analysed by the wise and then



accepted; they should not do so out of reverence.”

The Buddha avoided all cosmological questions concerning God and/or the universe. For the Buddha, such issues were of no real significance. Whilst the questions of a creator God or the origins of the universe were not philosophical-cum-theological problems to be avoided at all costs, at the same time, neither were they an ‘issue’ we needed to openly invite for debate. His indifference to such questions is portrayed throughout the Buddhist literature.

The Pali and Sanskrit texts have clear instances where the Buddha was challenged on metaphysical matters. In such instances, the Buddha was reluctant to engage in what he considered to be speculative matters that were clearly not relevant to the empirical nature of the problem in hand – namely, suffering and its eradication.

A question about God, the universe or indeed about the soul was considered ‘avyakrta’ – that is, “incorrectly formed”. It either contained inherent misconceptions in the question itself, or, such a question simply was not conducive to enlightenment. The parable of the arrow summarised his response to such issues as a creator God or origins of the universe.

‘Such speculative questions are as if a man, when wounded in battle with an arrow, will not accept help until he knows the answers to questions such as ‘who shot it?’, ‘where did it come from?’, ‘how and with what it was made?’ and ‘by whom was it crafted?’.

The focus and priority for a Buddhist is to remove the problem in hand and not look beyond it for answers that are not useful to the immediate problem. I suffer because I crave things, I long for things to last forever and I cannot see beyond the ignorance of my human condition. Whether there is a God or not would not change the basic factors of existence nor my human condition. Realising the cause of suffering and stopping this, preventing it from arising again would release me both from suffering and consequently the need to speculate.

For a Buddhist, the answer is right before us and in the nature of suffering and the human condition itself. It is not in the sky, up in the heavens or so incomprehensible that it is beyond our capabilities to reach. The relevant question should be directed towards ourselves and the answer found therein.



Suffering is the problem and its removal should be our pursuit. Get rid of the arrow and then ask all the speculative questions you like. You may find, however, that in removing the arrow you also remove the need to ask such questions in the first place.

Answer: Buddhism can be seen in scientific terms and as sharing the scientific outlook on life. Things work according to cause and effect and we are ourselves simply mental and physical formations with no spiritual substance. Things are ultimately empty of essence. However, the question of an ultimate God is always avoided by Buddhists because it is not relevant to speculate. Priority must be given to the problem in hand, namely, suffering.

Task: Read the following answer and produce a concise summary. Consider how your summary differs from others in the class and discuss whether any of the differences are significant.



The Dalai Lama's teachings about science and Buddhism

In 2000, the Dalai Lama gave a speech entitled 'The Need and Significance of Modern Science' to abbots from the major Tibetan monastic centres of learning and to hundreds of key Tibetan monastic scholars and leaders.

In his speech, the Dalai Lama explained that firstly the value of science to Tibetan Buddhism lay in the fact that it had enormously influenced in a positive way the lives of people through improving them. 'Developments in the field of science and technology have had positive impact on the life of people living in this world. It has directly benefited the people by helping them live a better and more comfortable life.'

In particular, the Dalai Lama argued that it was what had been regarded as the Western 'outsider's art of healing' which brought about correct diagnosis and medication rather than 'mere rituals based on teachings such as the Medicinal Tantra preached by Buddha Bhaishajya'. Buddha Bhaishajya is the Medicine Buddha in Mahayana Buddhism and is regarded as the supreme healer. Meditating on Buddha Bhaishajya is seen to be a very powerful method of bringing health and healing to oneself and others. In case of physical illness, reciting the mantra of the Buddha Bhaishajya over water and then drinking the water is seen as an important restorative.

A second point made by the Dalai Lama was that science was of value because it was 'very precise and accurate' in its analysis of 'the material world, evolution of universe, and nature of chemical substances.' This he believed would supplement and advance Buddhist observations in this area.

A third area identified by the Dalai Lama with regard to the value of science is a straightforward one concerning the future of Buddhism for Tibetans both inside and outside Tibet. The modern world relies on 'ceaseless effort and experimentation of science and technology, rather than mystical clairvoyance or miracle powers'. He argues therefore that it is only through bringing together science and Buddhism that 'belief and conviction' will be generated in the minds of the new generation of Tibetans particularly since they already enjoy much that modern technology has brought to them.

A fourth more philosophical point is that science is of value because it is based on empirical research, and is therefore concerned only with reality and truth. The Dalai Lama regards other religions as ideologies



'based on belief in god as the almighty creator'. In such religions, 'faith is a single-pointed devotion'. By contrast he regards Buddhism alone as combining faith with wisdom. As a result, Buddhism, unlike any other religion, is based on reality and truth. This means that science is of value because it essentially does what Buddhism is doing.

[adapted from Buddhism by Nick Heap]