



How well does Buddhism respond to the challenges from science?

It could be suggested that it is only through a selective approach that Buddhism and science are compatible. For example, whilst belief in the physical reality of Mount Meru may have waned, that is not the same for belief in the beings which populate Mount Meru such as the devas nor in the realms which can be found on the top of Mount Meru such as Tavatimsa or the hell realms lying under the continent of Jambudvīpa. The supernatural - and hence the unscientific - is woven through Buddhist thought and practice.

In addition, this is also apparent in the focus on particular features of the dhamma such as sunyata. The Dalai Lama notes how this concept might be congruent with quantum physics, but it is the same Dalai Lama who along with Tibetan monks practices Tantric meditation on a daily basis. Such meditation involves the entirely unscientific belief in the efficacy of using the vajra and bell, elaborate mudras and the creation and destruction of mandalas. In addition, elaborate visualisation is required when various Buddhas, bodhisattvas, devas, devaputras and the realms in which they exist are brought to mind. However, in contrast to this, the Dalai Lama would argue that the principles underlying Tantra are indeed quite 'scientific'.

Lopez suggests that whilst researchers might focus on Buddhist meditation and what can be measured via an MRI scan, this is ignoring the basic point of meditation which the Buddha taught: 'Monks this is the direct path for the purification of being, for the surmounting of sorrow and lamentation, for the disappearance of pain and grief, for the attainment of the true way, for the realisation of nibbana.' Therefore Lopez is arguing that whilst there may be some parallels, Buddhism and science are essentially different things. For examples, concepts such as anatta and anicca might seem compatible with science, but their purpose is specifically directed towards the Buddhist path.

It might be argued that the incompatibility between Buddhism and science is brought into sharp focus by consideration of the avyakata – the undetermined questions. Here the Buddha is asked questions of a speculative nature, such as about whether or not the cosmos is infinite. The Buddha replies with the Parable of the Poisoned Arrow and concludes that these questions are unimportant and that during the time spent asking the questions the man would die.



Overall, therefore whilst science is concerned with objective data and facts based on empirical research in order to establish truths about reality, Buddhism is only concerned with these tangentially since its goal is wholly unscientific: living the holy life and thus gaining nibbana.

TASK: Identify any intermediate conclusions and final conclusion in the following evaluative answer. Then compare with other class members to see if there are any significant differences. Develop the final conclusion.



The extent to which there is a close relationship between Buddhism and science

That there is a close relationship between Buddhism and science is asserted by a number of Buddhists. Examples of this can be seen from the 19th century. For example, the Japanese philosopher Inoue Enryō (1858-1919) founded a philosophy institute and wrote over one hundred books. His concern – which was that of many of his Buddhist contemporaries – was to defend Buddhism against the preaching of Christian missionaries whose influence was increasingly felt in Japan at that time. Inoue was ‘deeply critical of Christianity as unscientific and irrational, in distinction to Buddhism, which is scientific ... Buddhism was superior to Christianity because of its congruence with scientific fact.’ (Deal and Ruppert)

This general approach as to Buddhism’s affinity with scientific fact – in contrast to Christianity – was also upheld in the West. In his ‘Buddhism and Science: A Guide for the Perplexed’, Lopez observes that for many Victorians, ‘Buddhism was a tradition that saw the universe as subject to natural laws, without the need for any form of divine intervention. This led many European enthusiasts to declare Buddhism as the religion most suited to serious dialogue with Science, because both postulated the existence of immutable laws that governed the universe.’

Buddhism’s apparent congruence with scientific fact is also highlighted in this quotation attributed to Einstein: ‘The religion of the future will be a cosmic religion. It should transcend a personal God and avoid dogmas and theology. Covering both the natural and the spiritual, it should be based on a religious sense arising from the experience of all things, natural and spiritual as a meaningful unity. If there is any religion that would cope with modern scientific needs, it would be Buddhism.’

Furthermore, Buddhism eschews belief in a creator God who is responsible for the earth and all that it inhabits. This is combined with the rejection of the soul and its immortality. In addition, the concept of prayer being answered by God, or the punishment of hell and the reward of heaven being allotted by God, are also rejected. Hence, again, there is arguably a close relationship between Buddhism and science.

Many hold that the Buddhist concept of karma is scientific. In its essence, karma teaches that there is an unbreakable link between cause and effect. Causation appears to be a thoroughly modern and scientific



concept and is seen as a natural law present throughout the universe when seen in a mechanistic Newtonian way.

A further concept which some might argue shows the close relationship between Buddhism and science is that found in the Heart Sutra. In this Avalokitesvara teaches Sariputra that 'form is empty and emptiness is form'. The term for emptiness is sunyata and is a central concept in Mahayana Buddhism. It links closely with the Dalai Lama's belief that in recognising that 'things lack true existence', scientists draw close to the Cittamatra School.

However, there are many supernatural aspects to the many various forms of Buddhism throughout the world, for example, the Tantra within Tibetan Buddhism.

Despite this 'close relationship' between Buddhism and science there are many metaphysical aspects of Buddhism that science would reject, in particular, the Buddhist cosmology. It therefore seems that the relationship is not as close as would first appear.