

PUTTING THE BUDDHISM/SCIENCE DIALOGUE ON A NEW FOOTING

CATHERINE SHADDIX, PSYD, INSTRUCTOR
BAYWELL PSYCHIATRY GROUP

THE IMPLICIT AND EXPLICIT WORLDVIEWS
(INCLUDING THOSE INFLUENCED BY
MODERN SCIENCE) THAT UNDERLIE THE
CONTEMPORARY PRESENTATION OF
BUDDHISM AND THEIR IMPACT ON THE WAY
THAT BUDDHISM IS TAUGHT, RESEARCHED,
AND EXPERIENCED.



MANGALAM RESEARCH CENTER
FOR BUDDHIST LANGUAGES

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The implicit and explicit worldviews (including those influenced by modern science) that underlie the contemporary presentation of Buddhism and their impact on the way that Buddhism is taught, researched, and experienced.

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Shaddix introduced her talk by quoting from Tricycle's features editor Andrew Cooper about the difficulty of seeing past one's own presuppositions, as they are the medium by which one sees, which points to the value of dialogue across difference. Such dialogue also raises anxieties, she noted, including her own fear that the Dharma is being shaped by its intersection with science in ways that we might not be able to control or discern. With her own background combining practice in the Rinzai Zen and Nyingma traditions, as well as Ashtanga yoga, and clinical psychology, she explained that her goal in this context as a contemplative practitioner and teacher is to understand how hidden cultural assumptions influence her work, and as a psychologist, to skillfully integrate contemplative practices into existing and emerging forms of Western healing practices.

She defined contemporary Buddhism as forms of Buddhism that have emerged from engagement with the dominant cultural and intellectual forces of modernity all over the world, a kaleidoscope of hybrid formations that present highly divergent aspects of Buddhist philosophy and practice often side by side. She then noted her sources for this talk, from which she derived an overview of the landscape of contemporary Buddhism in the West: articles in mainstream popular press, Western Buddhist popular and academic journals, and descriptive titles of recent retreats advertised at an Insight Meditation Center.

The picture that emerged from the literature was one of multiple centers with overlapping frameworks, characterized by an extremely broad range of Buddhist practices. Examples representing this diversity included articles on applications of Western secularized mindfulness practice to Japanese swordsmanship, benefits of the Chinese Buddhist vegetarian diet in reducing greenhouse gas emissions, and prosperity Buddhism. The availability of Dharma texts digitally online contributes significantly to the mix: it is easier now than at any time in history to access teachings outside of one's own lineage. This in turn lessens the importance of direct teacher contact, creating a radical experiment in changing traditional forms of transmission.

The fading importance of lineage is part of a more general loss of a central authority or unitary world view. The danger in this, Shaddix noted, is the potential loss of internal coherence, an important issue for those who design interventions using contemplative practices. But it also creates opportunities for evolution as traditional forms are renegotiated. A multi-faceted debate on the function of prayer offered an example of this renegotiation.

Other dangers are that self-directed practice may limit itself to comfortable habits, and that blended practices may lack coherence. For example, an article describing a Chod retreat—an intense practice that involves a body offering in a cemetery or similar place that evokes fear and clinging to the body—included a prescription for a day of generosity practice casually integrated in life routines. Without a larger conceptual framework embedded in Buddhist tradition, such an apparently random combination could be deeply confusing to a newcomer. The conflation of mindfulness practice with many other Buddhist practices and its repurposing in secular environments raises similar confusion.

A second theme was the change of locus of authority to science, with the continuing impact of the mindfulness movement, the medicalization and psychologization of Buddhism, and its commodification as self-help or as a prescription for individual happiness. The Buddha's use of a medical model in describing the Four Noble Truths is offered as authority, but the goal has changed from soteriological to relief of pain or anxiety. Even when the science is sound the popular press tends to distort or exaggerate its efficacy. Over emphasis on measurable effects while ignoring the experiential aspects has other implications. When critics attack secularized mindfulness because of the danger of corrupting the Dharma, they miss an important factor: the experiential dimension of an MBSR course for pain involves a complex process of wanting relief, discovering that mindfulness will not remove the problem, and then reorienting oneself to problems in a new way. In this way, one learns how to tolerate existential uncertainty, a qualitative shift which is not a trivial or superficial contribution.

In stripping mindfulness and other contemplative practices of “religious baggage,” the removal of ethical context is a huge loss. It points to an individualistic culture uncomfortable with externally imposed ethical constraints, preferring the concept of a value neutral world where we can choose what values we enact. Shaddix suggested, quoting David McMahan's *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*, using mindfulness practice turned inward as a psychological method to transform internal negative dispositions as a path to more ethical behavior.

The prescription of mindfulness as a solution to life's problems, and the assumption of agency it implies, ends up holding the individual responsible for systemic problems. In response, the rising importance of social justice and inclusion of marginalized peoples are emerging themes. Shaddix acknowledged that this movement is being driven by political and social events in the culture that are beyond Buddhist practice, and they highlight the role of Sangha, potentially moving towards a culture of transformation, rather than, in Norman Fischer's phrase, “enlightenment fundamentalism.” Dharma practice in this context of social justice involves practices which are explicitly relational and often deeply challenge our comfort zones. This movement questions the idea that unprejudiced receptivity can exist, and also questions

the assumption that individual change is sufficient to reform deeply systemic injustices. It points to interdependence as a framework where mutual causality promotes an ethical stance that holds compassion for all beings. It may also be arrogant in ignoring the actual diversity of heritage Buddhism in the West.

Another theme that emerges from the popular literature and retreat topics is the impact of scientific research and frameworks. Science makes Buddhism accessible within the Western naturalistic world view, validates its practices, and grants it cultural capital. Science conveys authority, perhaps replacing some of the fading authority of intrinsic structures such as lineage. Neuroscience provides an explanatory framework for why Dharma practice works, and the advertisement for a retreat led by Rick Hanson titled “No-Self in the Brain: Insights from Neuroscience” claims that its perspectives offer “powerful and practical tools for deconstructing the apparent self.”

Shaddix speculated on ways that the intersection with science may influence how Dharma is taught. The validation of science is already presented as motivational, but will it impose its own standards? Will empirical measurement come to replace accounts of subjective experience? More orthodox ideas like reincarnation and full liberation from samsara will likely fade in importance. Emphasis on one’s teacher’s level of awakening, formerly a big issue, is already less relevant, and scientific endorsement may obviate faith and devotion. Likewise, the motivation for practice has been shifting from the historical goal of escape from samsara to improved psychological processes, self-focused healing and reduction of suffering, which may limit the possibilities of real transformation.

Following her presentation, Shaddix opened the discussion by posing a series of questions: At this point in the cultural experiment of integrating Buddhism, science, and Western culture, what course corrections might be needed? In making Buddhism successful, mainstream, friendly and popular, what are we sacrificing? In designing interventions using contemplative practices, how can we think in terms of an integrated path structure in our models? How might scientists better influence how the science/Buddhism dialogue is represented in the mainstream? How might they take responsibility for the ethical implications of the stories their research tells?

The presentation seemed to strike a nerve for the graduate students participating. Sean Smith spoke passionately in witness of what he felt as an “existential nightmare” in his personal practice and long retreats, in negotiating the tension between the authenticity of deep tradition and that of science and modern freedoms. Zachary Walsh echoed these sentiments and noted also the lack of diversity of representation on the level of disciplines, and how that can shape the dialogue—for example how the social, cultural, systemic, and structural issues mentioned are rendered invisible by the absence of representation from political science, sociology, economics, and environmental studies, or stakeholders in social movements, in the current conversation.

Francisca Cho spoke of bringing the content of this meeting to her students and noted the popularity of any course linking Buddhism and science. She felt that Western culture had reached a turning point where the parameters of what science does—ethically, religiously, and spiritually—could potentially expand and that its conjunction with Buddhism was enabling that.

Nikki Mirghafori addressed how the effect on popular culture of the conjunction of Buddhism and science was comparable to the path of merit in traditional Asian culture, as a way to participate and benefit from practice without full engagement in monastic life, and that it likewise could serve as a gateway to deeper practice. Andy Dreitcer reinforced this notion of the popularity of the Buddhism/science theme as a recruitment tool, comparable to aspects of evangelical Christianity that were attractants not to be denigrated in the bigger picture.

David Germano responded that historically, Buddhism has often crossed severe cultural and linguistic boundaries and been transformed in the process—with similar debates to those occurring now—and there is nothing exceptional about its encounter with modernity. He noted two problems nevertheless: the racism and cultural appropriation directed at Tibetan and other Asian Buddhist groups by Western Buddhists, and the absence of great Buddhist forms of artistic expression in its adaptation in the West. Zara Houshmand observed that great art typically arises from an environment of more mediocre activity that prepares the way.

Shaun Gallagher introduced the concept of meta-plasticity as used by cognitive archeologists such as Lambros Malafouris, defining how changes occur in whole cultural systems, and observed that questions around what Buddhism loses in the encounter with science are similar to questions around the loss of oral culture after the invention of printing.

Clifford Saron spoke to the need to educate the public on the limits of scientific authority, and how the appeal to science as validating Buddhist practice was now embedded for many years, and routinely cited by Western Buddhist teachers.

Andy Dreitcer offered suggestions from his own experience of efforts to “un-discipline” the university, referring to techniques to facilitate trans-disciplinary dialogue through dynamic processes that mediate between large and small groups. He also offered a metaphor for removing Buddhist practices such as training in non-reactivity from their original context—you can train someone to shoot free throws very well in isolation, but they won’t know how to play a game of basketball. Saron noted that the training may also have serious unintended consequences, as reactivity is biologically adaptive. Dreitcer pushed his question further: what value was added to that skill of non-reactivity by the Buddhist framework? His intention, he noted, was to explore the possibility of “re-enchanting” this theme for other traditions in his own teaching of spiritual formation for a diverse student body. Richard Maddock offered the canonical answer that the Eightfold Path in totality was the whole game, with

contemplative practice as only one aspect of the path and the seven others equally important.

Linda Heuman reflected that we need to be careful about dismissing the importance of authenticity in tradition, and to remember that science also is a tradition, historically situated and contextually embedded. Yet we can still draw a boundary between science and pseudoscience and we have to be very concerned about preserving the integrity of authentic science, given our current political situation.