

# PUTTING THE BUDDHISM/SCIENCE DIALOGUE ON A NEW FOOTING

MICHAEL SHEEHY, PHD, DIRECTOR OF  
PROGRAMS, MIND AND LIFE INSTITUTE

## INNER KNOWING AND THE WAY OF BEING HUMAN: ON THE HORIZON OF EPISTEMOLOGIES IN THE BUDDHISM / SCIENCE DIALOGUE



MANGALAM RESEARCH CENTER  
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## Inner Knowing and the Way of Being Human: Epistemologies on the Horizon of the Buddhism / Science Dialogue

*Michael Sheehy, PhD*

Sheehy opened with a metaphor for the experience of this meeting as that of astronauts in orbit above the planet of the Buddhism/science dialogue, who will return to report with elation about this transformative experience. He explained his own background in academic Tibetan studies, the influence of the early Mind & Life dialogues on his thinking, his training in a monastery in Tibet, his focus on translation and the preservation of literary traditions, and his position now as Director of Programs for the Mind & Life Institute. He framed the continuing dialogue as a slow process of translation of world views and knowledge systems.

Sheehy first addressed the Buddhist exceptionalism implied in the commonly voiced claim that Buddhism is not a religion but rather a science of the mind,<sup>i</sup> noting that both “science” and “religion” are newly constructed categories that fail to recognize how Buddhism is dependent on invisible cultural forces that are particular to specific times, places, and human communities. Considering whether Buddhism is compatible with modern Euro-American experimental science is foremost a question of culture, not necessarily of religion or science.

He reviewed the multiplicity of systems that shaped the broad cosmopolitan matrix of Indic science in the first millennium, including both doctrinally diverse Buddhist schools and non-Buddhist systems in dialogue with them. Buddhist modernist claims for the Abhidharma texts as empirical documents of meditative experience are naïve and ahistorical, ignoring the likely process of their construction through scholastic critiques and hermeneutical lenses, edited over generations to reflect particular technical vocabularies. We do not have the historiographical record to know how first-person meditative experiences informed the Abhidharma texts, but observation of Tibetan teachers currently offering meditation instruction in Dzogchen, Mahamudra or Kalachakra traditions show that experiential accounts live in oscillation with Buddhist understandings of the mind that are consensual and contextual.

Steven Goodman offered a reference from the Sanskrit texts. In the context of a discussion of the definition of Dharma, Vasubandhu’s Abhidharma compendium describes the process of *adhigama*—usually translated as “realization” but referring to understanding teachings rather than consensual reality confirmed by experiment. Tibetan tradition explains *adhigama* as having three phases: 1) understanding, which involves listening deeply, 2) contemplating what was heard in light of one’s own experience (*anubhava*), and 3) realization. Goodman compared this to Husserl’s claim that what people call experience is often laced with meta-theoretical concepts.

Though prefacing his words with a broad rejection of Buddhist exceptionalism, David Germano commented that Buddhism was indeed comparable to science in that it has chosen as a general orientation to focus on practices, which are more diverse, and constantly and extensively theorized, than he had found in any other religious tradition. He noted the ambiguous position of many Buddhist texts purporting to describe meditative practices that were probably never practiced as such, which had other philosophical or sociopolitical purposes.

In examining how epistemology and our understanding of the meaning of “science” has shaped the dialogue, Sheehy then summarized historical ideas about objectivity. Recognizing the colonialist history of science, and the distinct factors that led to the European accomplishment of modern science, he echoed Jonardon Ganeri’s case for a *polycentric* science.<sup>ii</sup> He characterized modernity by its “intercultural contact zones” where hybridization, juxtapositioning, and porousness resist easy distinctions between the modern and traditional.<sup>iii</sup> Concepts such as Karin Knorr Cetina’s “epistemic cultures” move us closer to understanding genuine modes of scientific inquiry, how it produces knowledge, and who is participating. He emphasized that science in this broad sense is a body of public knowledge that is plural, polycentric, reproducible, consensual, and culturally relevant.

Clifford Saron later commented that “public knowledge” is really the hermeneutical crafting of narratives for peer review, and its relationship to what the general public knows more broadly is problematic. Much of the knowledge produced by science is not readily available or transparent even to other scientists, given the constraints of scientific publishing, let alone to the public.

Sheehy then questioned what distinguishes Euro-American science from this more general definition, and argued that objectivity is identified as the signifying trait of modern Western science, so much so that science is, however imprecisely, conflated with objectivity. A historical review of the meaning of objectivity shows a progression from emotional detachment, to quantification, and the belief in a bedrock reality that is independent of human observers.<sup>iv</sup> By 1817, the term had acquired a new meaning in Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s equation of nature with whatever is objective, and of internal experience with the subjective. The advent of photography in scientific study led to the idealization of “blind sight”—an asymmetrical objective vision of reality, or knowledge that bears no trace of the knower.

The history of objectivity is a subset of the broader history of epistemology that informs Euro-American science, Sheehy noted. To appreciate the role of epistemologies in an intercultural dialogue, we need to understand the embedded histories that inform their ways of knowing. The production of scientific knowledge relies on bracketing differences, with the primary variable of difference being the shared lifeworld of human experience. The problem is that this entire project of objective knowledge production takes place within the lifeworld. Husserl concluded that it is absurd to try to describe the lifeworld by redacting its own context to reduce it to an objectivist scientific model. As he searched for invariants like those of mathematics, Husserl discovered that, in its most radical form, phenomenology was deconstructing the foundations of science by challenging its experimental protocols. He realized that the most important aspect of phenomenology was to be willing to transform oneself, a project that started in science and ended in contemplation.

Sean Smith commented that Husserl thought of himself not as deconstructing the foundations of science but as articulating a new kind of foundation based on a transcendental conception of the structure of conscious experience. Jack Petranker wondered if this foundationalist approach might be relevant to scientists looking to put science on a new foundation through the influence of Buddhist practice, but Saron objected that contemplative practice operates on a more personal than systemic level, affecting your craft and foregrounding the ways in which the lifeworld is continuously

present within the craft. Bill Waldron countered the notion that contemplative practices give us any clear mirror on nature or our internal nature. He observed that the Buddhist analytical discourses systematically challenge the notion that we experience a direct reflection of reality: as soon as we talk we are using concepts that structure our perception of reality.

Kalina Christoff observed that the discussion of objectivity highlighted a tension in the room between science's objectivity claims and the humanities' avoidance of privileging any source of knowledge, and that Buddhism might help to find a position between these two extremes. Sheehy reflected that this resonated with his own framing in different language of the tension between objectivity and subjectivity—objectivity with its limitations on what sort of knowledge can be accessed, and subjectivity with its proneness to bias, error, and deception—and that Buddhism holds the space between, straddling the subject/object duality in a very “live wire way of being in the world.”

Looking in parallel at the history of Buddhist science, Sheehy observed that there does not appear to be any significant European influence on scientific inquiry in Tibet until the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, when Tibetan topography and geographical knowledge were affected, although there was contact between European science and premodern Asia elsewhere. Nevertheless, medical scholars in 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century Tibet were confronting empirical claims that raised similar problems to those of the current Buddhism/science dialogue. Writing during the 1930s or 1940s, the legendary creative intellect Gendun Chopel envisioned modern European science confirming Buddhist concepts, including impermanence, the insubstantiality of phenomena, and dependent origination.<sup>v</sup> During the Cultural Revolution, the Geluk scholar Dungkar Lobzang Trinle<sup>vi</sup> discussed Tibetan medical science and science of the mind, coining the Tibetan neologism “*tshan rig*” which is translated into English as “science”<sup>vii</sup> but literally means “to know the parts.” This usage continues to resonate within the Tibetan cultural construction of science. The Dalai Lama has recently stated that the dialogue was not between Buddhism and science, but rather between “Buddhist science and modern science,” escalating what is meant by “science” within the Tibetan cultural matrix.

Sheehy examined how a recent Tibetan language publication of selected Tengyur literature on science and philosophy was organized. He noted that the infatuation with categorizing the mind was pan-Indic and not confined to the extensive typologies of mental phenomena in the Abhidharma, but if taken seriously, Buddhist textual presentations of consciousness and its transformations may well enrich emerging theoretical and methodological approaches in the mind sciences that seek to move beyond subject-object dualism.

The etymology of the Tibetan term for consciousness literally means, “knowing through divisions,” or dividing and discern the features of awareness, but awareness itself is understood to exist independent of this parceling. Mind is by definition deluded by perceptual distortions caused by inhibiting forces of emotional or cognitive obscuration, dividing awareness and its objects.

Buddhist models of mind generally categorize conscious experience into interior awareness and exterior referents. Mahayana Abhidharma literature identifies three distinct sets that interact to co-create the subject / object complex: the six sense faculties of the sensory organs, the correlated six sensible objects (sights, sounds, smells, tastes and textures), and six modes of cognitive awareness (visual, auditory, olfactory,

gustatory, tactile, and mental). In this model, the bifurcated categories of subjective interior awareness and objective exterior referents interact dynamically from moment to moment. Thus cognitive awareness is a subtle active process that emerges from the *correlative dynamic* of the subject / object complex,<sup>viii</sup> and gives rise to the dualistic experience of separateness. This division of the knower and the known creates the polarizing patterns of attraction and repulsion. The habit of fixating on one's sense of subjectivity or self as separate from "other" exasperates the dynamic, giving rise to patterns of self-cherishing.

Saron noted that this material—acquired a long time ago under very different cultural circumstances—was suggestive of the modern understanding of how we actively create vision through the superimposition of memory and prior experience. Sheehy suggested that this topic of constructions of the objective world and notions of subjectivity, which Buddhists have written on extensively, was a ripe area for engagement because it is largely presumed within the experimental design of modern science. Bill Waldron added that the Indian Buddhist analysis of mind was consonant with the 4E (embodied, embedded, enactive, extended) view of cognitive science and could contribute to that understanding. Cortland Dahl raised the point that the construction of categories in the Indian Buddhist canonical literature presented in this publishing project was a product of the scholastic orientation of the Dalai Lama's Gelugpa lineage, and other lineages might have approached the subject in a very different manner. It was pointed out that the organization of the material as published was not the original structure, and may reflect the Dalai Lama's engagement with Western science. Steven Goodman noted that Chinese translations of Western scientific and philosophical literature might also influence the categorization of the Tengyur materials.

In the last section of his talk, Sheehy reflected on the nature of dialogue, referring to Mikhail Bakhtin's analysis of the "dialogic" nature of the novel, where the quality of language is "entangled, shot through with shared thoughts, points of view, alien value judgments, and accents,"<sup>ix</sup> and thus situated within a broader social imaginary. For Bakhtin, knowledge and its expressive shared meaning emerge dialogically. The Indic conception of knowledge was understood as embedded within the fabric of experience. Dialogue was a privileged mode of engagement with alternative views that enabled lived knowledge to emerge and be further refined through a process of negotiation and adaptation. Dialogue was an analytical device that recognized the transformative power of difference, and one that is alive and well in the Tibetan social imaginary.

In conclusion, Sheehy explained how the pre-Buddhist Tibetan concept of humanity itself frames human knowledge as multimodal, limited by human faculty, and bound by context: to be human is to be hermeneutic, and to constantly appreciate difference. He suggested that goal of the Buddhism/science dialogue is to foster the emergence of new modes of accessing knowledge. In this dialogue, experience dances in an inherent tension, oscillating between the non-objectivist / non-subjectivist stance. This process is co-creative and co-emergent. It is this nuclear core activity at this naked interface of difference where knowledge is catalyzed.

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<sup>i</sup> Evan Thompson, "Ethics of Science and Experience in the Age of the Anthropocene,"

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<https://www.upaya.org/2017/06/zen-brain-thompson-mind-social-part-2-12/>.

<sup>ii</sup> Ganeri 2013, 349.

<sup>iii</sup> Subrahmanyam.

<sup>iv</sup> Datson and Galison, 29.

<sup>v</sup> Jinpa, 873.

<sup>vi</sup> Pema Bhum, 'An Overview of the Life of Professor Dungkar Lozang Trinlé Rinpoche' in *Latse Library Newsletter*, vol 5, 2008, pp. 18-36

<sup>vii</sup> Tshan rig = tshan rig - science [rang byung khams dang spyi tshogs, bsam blo sogs kyi phyi rol yul gyi chos nyid rnam sde tshan so sor dbye zhib byed pa'i shes bya'i ma lag] [IW]

Tshan pa = part / fragments

<sup>viii</sup> Waldron ...

<sup>ix</sup> Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," 276.