

PUTTING THE BUDDHISM/SCIENCE DIALOGUE ON A NEW FOOTING

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THE IMPORTANCE OF KEEPING DIFFERENCES IN SIGHT IN BUDDHISM'S DIALOGUE WITH SCIENCE AND MODERNITY



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The Importance of Keeping Differences in Sight in Buddhism's Dialogue with Science and Modernity

Linda Heuman

Heuman brings the sensibilities of a journalist who has covered the Buddhism/science dialogue extensively and was involved in the planning of this meeting. Her presentation challenged the presumption of harmonious compatibility between Buddhism and science.

Claims for the compatibility between Buddhism and science have a history that spans over a century, but have been shown to be more selective presentation than factual. While such claims are often intended to raise Buddhism's status by appealing to the authority of science, Heuman argued that they in fact disadvantage Buddhism.

She situated her presentation in the larger context of interdisciplinary collaboration, and the need for people with fundamentally different worldviews to join in solving urgent global crises. For encounters across difference to foster mutual understanding, each partner must meet the other on the other's terms. But when natural science is one of the partners, the very project of bridging multiple worlds is questionable, because for natural science the possibility of multiple worlds or truths is incoherent. Challenging science's exclusive authority without undermining its universal validity is difficult in a time of climate change denial and the conflation of truth and lies in public discourse. Heuman looked to the work of Bruno Latour, philosopher, sociologist of science, and anthropologist of modernity as a guide through this "post-modern snarl."

She focused first on our inability to take Buddhism seriously on its own terms. Showing an image of the Dalai Lama in prayer, she asked participants to consider how they interpreted it: "We have a hard time thinking he is actually doing what he thinks he is doing." We might rationalize, for example, that his invoking a deity is a form of psychological bootstrapping to invoke its qualities in himself. In illustration, she reversed the terms, imagining a Peruvian shaman visiting a scientist's research lab and returning home to explain what he saw there in terms of witchcraft and spells. If we are comfortable seeing the Dalai Lama meditating, but less so when he is performing rituals, we need to consider that traditional Buddhist ritual activities might be—in Latour's terms—"valid modes of access to the real."

Quoting from Thupten Jinpa's explanation of the operating principles of the Mind and Life dialogues, Heuman observed that they choose to emphasize commonalities and ignore differences as a precondition for enabling collaboration. The common ground is thus constructed, not discovered. Differences were the starting point: because Buddhism and science are so different, they needed a conversation strategy to produce enough commonality to collaborate. But as Donald Lopez has objected, bracketing assumptions doesn't actually work to produce compatibility between Buddhism and science, because "it takes out of play the most foundational topics on both sides—topics which are both regulative principles and the sites of intractable differences."ⁱ

According to Thupten Jinpa, in order to find common ground to converse, participants in Buddhism and science dialogue have bracketed from conversation certain controversial notions. On the side of Buddhism these include the concepts of rebirth, karma, and the possibility of full enlightenment; on the side of science, they include physicalism, reductionism, and casual closure. Left in play as though uncontroversial however, are metaphysical realism and naturalism. Because metaphysical realism is left in play, the conversation presumes two modern assumptions that Mahayana Buddhism opposes: that the objects of the world are separate from perceivers and exist independently of them. Presumptive naturalism excludes everything supernatural.

Because these presumptions are implicit to the conversation, they frame what can count as valid knowledge within the conversation. For example, the Dalai Lama's expertise includes subduing obstructing demons; summoning, gathering, and propitiating helpful forces; and foreseeing the future. Clearly, none of that is to be considered credible knowledge in this context.

Heuman noted that there are other possible strategies aside from bracketing. The Buddhist scholastic tradition in India and Tibet has a long history of encounters with different worldviews; instead of ignoring differences they debated them. Her own suggestion was to explore instead the possibility of expanding what counts as credible knowledge.

She then turned to Bruno Latour's book, *The Modern Cult of the Factish Gods*, which explores how beliefs and knowledge have arisen in modernity as exclusive, rival, and unequal categories. Knowledge pertains to things that are imagined to be objectively real and autonomous, independent of the mind, while beliefs are subjective, dependent on mind or social consensus and thus seen as fabricated, prone to bias and corruption, and by nature fallible. This ingrained prejudice against "belief" is why Mind and Life's bracketing of differences is misplaced; what threatens accord is not differences but inequality, and the imbalance of credibility is an inequality of power in the context of dialogue. As sociologist of religion Robert Bellah wrote, "To assume that 'we,' particularly if we mean by that the modern West, have universal truths based on revelation, philosophy, or science that we can enforce on others, is the ideological aspect of racism, imperialism, and colonialism."ⁱⁱ If instead of eliminating differences we were to eliminate the inequality of credibility, these differences could become the site of most fertile collaboration.

The emphasis on commonality in the dialogue between Buddhism and science is a problem because it dissimulates, explicitly framing the interlocutors as equal partners, and because it hides the inequality, it blocks any actual path to equal partnership. Beyond the Buddhism/science dialogue, this implicit imbalance of credible knowledge is also the crucible in which modern Buddhism is being forged as secular, proscribing many potential contributions from traditional Buddhism.

Heuman offered a solution to this impasse by questioning the authoritative reality of facts, which are understood to originate from independent objects and to exist in a manner unmediated by humans. Mahayana Buddhists reject these premises explicitly, arguing that everything that exists conventionally is mediated and interdependent. But that claim is handicapped, coming from a source that is not granted credibility.

Latour himself challenged the view that science presents of its own objective authority through his ethnographic study of the neuroendocrinology laboratory at the Salk Institute over several years in the mid-1970s. The scientists' research process was influenced by such factors as money flow, email exchanges, and instrumentation, and actively shaped their findings in a way that invalidated any claim that the facts existed independently of that process. To imagine that facts reflect independent states of affairs, Latour concluded, is to have a wrong view of the nature of facts. To assume that a phenomenon is either socially constructed or objectively real leaves out multiple intermediate modes of existence, each with its own criteria for what counts as valid knowledge. It is a mistake, he says, to judge one mode of existence by the criteria of another: asking the Dalai Lama's ritual practices to satisfy the requirements of natural science is a category mistake. There is also no inherent reason to divide existence conceptually between objects/things/nature on the one hand versus subjects/humans/culture on the other. Graham Harman, an interpreter of Latour reminds that other divisions have prevailed: the celestial and terrestrial spheres of ancient physics, or the male or female of the structure of primitive grammar.ⁱⁱⁱ

The errors that flow from the modernist view—that we stand outside of nature, and can understand it objectively, and conquer it with that understanding—have been refuted by the reality of climate change. In Latour's view, the separation of nature and culture was a linchpin of the modern paradigm. Waking up to the reality of our entanglement with nature has thrown us into a crisis both existential and practical. The tools of our culture—our narratives, political institutions, community structures, aesthetic sensibilities, and even our language, he says, are inadequate to understand, manage, govern, express and inhabit this new world. Given that the paradigm shift he observes is triggered by a fundamental insight resonant with Mahayana philosophy, Buddhism may have something to contribute to the discussion.

Latour seeks to “recall modernity” as a company might recall a flawed product.^{iv} By focusing on differences instead of commonalities between Buddhism and modernity, we can bring Buddhism into the broader sphere of social critiques of modernity and reposition the Buddhism and science dialogue in the context of pressing social concerns.

Heuman closed by adding that, in the effort to bring humanities and social sciences into the dialog between Buddhism and the Western tradition, the creative arts had been neglected and should also be considered as a partner at the table. If we are trying to communicate across difference, creative writers and actors are skilled at assuming other points of views, and their tools are valuable in addressing a difficult task.

In the discussion that followed, Martijn Van Beek noted efforts to involve artists in the dialogue historically that had not been very successful, and Heuman reflected on the difficulty of navigating different knowledge communities in the context of interdisciplinary work. She observed that the politics of knowledge which play out in the Buddhism/science encounter exist also in academia in the marginalization of the humanities and hegemony of STEM disciplines. David Germano described a project at Pennsylvania State University that is premised on using scientific vocabulary to examine 14 qualities of human flourishing such as compassion, diversity, and beauty. It was difficult, he said, to identify a viable scientific framework or body of literature

on aesthetic process, which he saw as specially concerning because of its importance in contemplative practice.

Shaun Gallagher described some of his own experiences with scientists who he was surprised to find were closer to Latour's post-modern position than he had assumed. This led to a discussion of the role of media in shaping our perceptions of science, and the difficulties the scientists perceived in dealing with journalists' oversimplification. The scientists' own contribution to this dynamic was called into question—their lack of understanding of how to engage productively with press and how journalistic ethics precludes the type of review they have come to expect from the process of publishing.

Returning to the topic of differences, Clifford Saron pointed to moments of incommensurability in the history of the dialogue that were ignored as the scientists assumed commonality, or else caused viscerally negative reactions. He saw the resulting efforts to bracket metaphysical beliefs as ultimately unproductive, and indeed had led to blatant scientific hegemony. The current meeting, he noted, was occurring as a direct consequence of those missteps. Francisca Cho added that our models of cultural interaction tend to emphasize hegemony, as in the narrative of how Buddhism came to China. Gaelle Desbordes described a more recent Buddhism/science conference of the Emory-Tibet Partnership that had gone beyond bracketing, inviting both sides to discuss their most fundamental worldviews, however incompatible. She attributed this progress to education having prepared the ground: the scientists were familiar with Buddhism and the monks had received training in science.

Chelsea Hall noted how the power imbalance between science and Buddhism was an extension of the dynamics of orientalism. Kalina Christoff observed that the same power dynamics exist within the scientific community, where studying the mind puts you at the bottom of the ladder, and her own interest in spontaneous thought was taboo at the beginning of her career. The denial of introspective observation as a valid form of measurement was a similar hegemonic stance from hard science, and has only begun to shift with neuroimaging technologies validating the introspective observation.

David McMahan took a provocative stand: "How do we evaluate which knowledge communities deserve the equal footing that you are advocating for Buddhism?... Can you make the same argument for a creation scientist?" David Germano spoke to this from his own deep experience working with Tibetans and grappling very directly with the incommensurability of knowledge embedded in a different world view. He insisted that our exceptionalist embrace of Buddhism is ill-guided, and that we need to treat Buddhism and creationism identically in this context. Saron asked how we might move from bracketing or withholding criticism to actually understanding how something apparently wrong makes sense from the other point of view, and he drew a line from this to the current polarized political situation in the US. The question is not only difficult to answer, Heuman observed, it is important not just for Buddhism and science but the world at large.

ⁱ Donald S. Lopez Jr., "The Future of the Buddhist Past: A Response to Readers" *Zygon*, 45.4 (2010), 883-895.

ⁱⁱ Robert Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution—From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2011), 606.

ⁱⁱⁱ Graham Harman, *Prince of Networks—Bruno Latour and Metaphysics*, 58.

^{iv} Bruno Latour, "The Recall of Modernity," in *Cultural Studies Review*, 13.1 (2007), 11-30.