THE COALESCENT DIALOGUE BETWEEN BUDDHISM AND SCIENCE

Modern Western science is popularly depicted as a fundamentally oppositional entity to the highly personal set of values and divinely-informed principles housed within theology\(^1\). Eastern religion is, however, distinctively sympathetic in its appreciation of a singularly “scientific” approach towards understanding oneself and the material world which closely corresponds with the research-oriented methodology of Western science. According to the work of Buddhist scholar and philosopher Alan Wallace, this approach is prevalently illustrated within the realm of Buddhism\(^2\), even to the extent that a pragmatic understanding of one’s universe and spiritual achievement can be considered identical pursuits\(^3\).

As I do not currently possess the level of intimate knowledge and insight with regard to transcendental Buddhist mythology which may be required to inform further parallels and points of potentially irreconcilable discord between the two disciplines, I do not wish to argue a grandiose conclusion as to the feasibility of universally pairing the complex systems of religion with those of science. Additionally, the application of scientific corollaries I associate with Buddhism extend solely to Alan Wallace’s experience within his own tradition and his subsequent understanding of it; therefore, it is not my intention to address the entire spectrum of all Buddhist traditions. I instead intend to structure my exploratory case for the fascinating

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coalescence of Buddhism and science based upon the object of my research: this being the scarcely discussed potentiality for a meaningful convergence of religious and scientific principles. This is a consideration I find especially relevant within the present context of our society in light of contemporary notions of incompatibility.

In this paper, using Alan Wallace’s work as my premises for this assumption, I make the claim that the institution of modern science is accepted by Buddhism as an interwoven tendency of harmonious empirical thought using the collective evidence of commonalities found in Buddhist and scientific methodology as well as the relatively congruent ambition shared between the two disciplines. In following Wallace’s pattern of reasoning, I consequently seek to question whether interdisciplinary collaboration is possible in consideration of these similarities.

Recognizing that Buddhism possesses characteristics indicative of its compatibility with Western science provides an intriguing point where one may begin to investigate and surmise the approximated depth and contemporary significance of such parallels. I will introduce the premise that the primary field in which pronounced symmetry of Buddhist tradition and modern science can be readily observed is within the methodologies of both disciplines. However, in order to accurately present these coalescences according to my grasp of Alan Wallace’s Buddhist tradition, I must first define my present understanding of science within this context as an objective system of procedures which endeavors to expand one’s understanding of the world through the knowledge of natural phenomena.

\[\text{Ibid.}\]

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4 Ibid.
It is this perspective of Western science which speaks to the methodological resemblance it shares with Buddhism; however, it is my position that this interesting correlation should be considered largely implicit. Allow me to explain:

We are not strangers to the general precepts of Western scientific methodology. Most know that the scientific method dictates the procedure of natural inquiry permissible in the modern world using experimentation. From theory to conclusion, one must first construct a testable hypothesis, then measure the outcome, and subsequently analyze the meaning of these results. In addition, most of us are aware that it is the sole interest of modern science to formulate testable hypotheses pertaining solely to the natural world in lieu of metaphysical concerns. Therefore, conclusions derived from use of this scientific method are concerned with material applicability dictated by the consequently material standards of defensible hypotheses. This means that Western science only considers something proven if its qualitative and/or quantitative truth can be made visible through objective experimentation. This is its sole standard of evidence.

Contrastingly, Alan Wallace describes Buddhism as a discipline which values both external physical phenomena and subjective mental phenomena. This means that what Buddhism has in common with science is a similar interest in the nature of the material world, though it also concerns itself with introspective matters and understanding the nature of oneself. Wallace also says that Buddhist practices embody an interdependent relationship of reasoning which regards these two apparently contradictory approaches to knowledge as equally valid.

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sources of information in understanding causal mechanisms. He elaborates the necessity of these methods in saying, “Just as unaided human vision was found to be an inadequate instrument for examining the moon, planets and stars, Buddhists regard the undisciplined mind as an unreliable instrument for examining mental objects, processes, and the nature of consciousness. Drawing from the experience of earlier Indian contemplatives, the Buddha refined techniques for stabilizing and refining the attention and used them in new ways, much as Galileo improved and utilized the telescope for observing the heavens.” Therefore, in addition to the empirical principles inherent in (though not exclusive to) the scientific method, Buddhists have also developed a system of inward experiential inquiry with its own criteria for validity. Ironically, it was Galileo himself who said, “In questions of science, the authority of a thousand is not worth the humble reasoning of a single individual.”

I do not wish to draw the conclusion that the Buddhist way of obtaining knowledge about the world is a twin counterpart of the scientific method. The similarity between Buddhist and scientific methodology does not then rest in a structural homogeneity in shared procedural methods but rather in the fact that these procedures exist and, differences in outlook aside, are subject to observation following rational analysis within both disciplines. As Albert Einstein aptly points out, “It is not the result of scientific research that ennobles humans and enriches their nature, but the struggle to understand while performing creative and open-minded intellectual work.” Hence the basis of my earlier conclusion which made reference to implicit

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9 Einstein, Albert. "Good and Evil," 1933. Published in Mein Weltbild (1934), 14; reprinted in Ideas and Opinions, 12.
similarities, here meaning the dual humanistic effort towards drawing conclusions about the nature of life and its processes within a developed system of observation and analysis.

In light of this, I argue that what Buddhism and science ultimately desire are the same thing. My definition of scientific ambition again mirrors Einstein’s conviction that science seeks to satisfy the longing for pure knowledge. Consequently, I do not find this description contrary to Buddhism’s religious pursuit of satisfying one’s same existential curiosity through pertinent means, and it is with this outlook that my opinion regarding the identical nature of Buddhism’s ideological accordance with scientific purpose originates.

I easily concede to the point that (as per my own knowledge) modern science exclusively considers evidence which can behave in a manner of universally conclusive consistency—that is, the truth of its hypotheses can be verified objectively. I acknowledge that empiricism dictates that the first-person experiences which are of substantial value in Buddhism make for ineligible candidates in terms of Western scientific reasoning. In this sense, given my present understanding of the matter, Buddhism and science subjectively differ on the grounds of what each discipline assumes to be most essential.

However, I do not find this matter sufficient in suggesting that these objectives are separate, nor that the solutions to these essential matters would not be of interest to both fields should they accord with each discipline’s standard of experiential conviction and material proof, respectively. In fact, it is even with this caveat that they do meet at a pivotal point, this being that where Buddhism pursues essential understanding, it often demonstratively uses methods we


associate with science as a vehicle towards this aim. Furthermore, unlike Western religion, Buddhism does not intrinsically concern itself with numbering nor identifying the express limitations of modern science. Modern science cannot similarly discredit the internal objectives of Buddhist ideology as per its own system of first requiring empirical evidence before theories can be disproved. In observing the intersubjectivity of metaphysically-oriented religion and objective science, Wallace considers Harvard philosopher Hilary Putnam’s following observation: “The stars are indeed independent of our minds in the sense of being causally independent; we did not make the stars. The fact that there is no one metaphysically privileged description of the universe does not mean that the universe depends on our minds.”

Of course, it is also true that Buddhism’s existential curiosity neither begins nor ends with an acceptance of scientific materialism, which Wallace describes as a dogma which requires intellectual and emotional allegiance to the belief that the world is solely external composition of observable matter. The fact that the physical dimension of scientific reasoning is eventually transcended in Buddhism can hardly be perceived as an irreconcilable hindrance, for within science itself there are often myriad theoretical controversies regardless of the strength of pure deduction upon which they are based. Therefore, this concession merely expresses a limitation in the otherwise broad extent to which scientific achievement empathizes with Buddhism’s objective of pure knowledge, and vice-versa. Given what I find to be an impressive level at which the two disciplines are highly alike, such divergences therefore fail to entirely eradicate the plausibility of a meaningful relationship between Eastern religion and Western science.

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If I may refer to what I believe is yet another relevant difference between Buddhism and Western religious doctrine, the assertions of Buddhist scripture are in the unique position of being ever-subject to scrutiny in accordance with any modern refutations which may discredit past teachings\textsuperscript{14}. This level of malleability consequently means that Buddhism possesses the ability to further develop with each new and inspiring revelation about the world which definitively characterizes scientific theories and hypotheses. Wallace and the Dalai Lama then mutually agree that Buddhism therefore does not regard the rapid progression of scientific effort towards worldly investigation as a blasphemous threat to an everlasting and unchanging truth (as Abrahamic creation stories can be characterized), but the tradition rather views scientific attainment the way one may receive a gift: in this case, a sacred gift which serves as a useful interface through which to develop a heightened appreciation for the world.

Is it impossible for science to ever perceive religion in a similar light? I should hope not. After all, it is hardly the condemnation of religion which truly inspires science, and in keeping with its own principle of open objectivism, Western science should not as an institution feel opposed by the notion of transcendental beliefs which do not speak to its own dogma of materialism, but instead maintain an independence of judgment lest such formerly inconceivable beliefs yield concepts of coincidental value to its pursuits.

Conclusively speaking, are laical facts and inherited values as violently dichotomous as the modern preoccupation with this issue suggests? I should say not. One’s values are continually informed by material observation, and material observations can be judged in turn by their beneficial qualities. Alan Wallace and I therefore view Buddhism as a tradition that perceives

scientific faculties as significantly useful towards the development of individual reasoning when combined with its own internal precepts.

This is why I concur with Alan Wallace’s assertion that through the hospitable environment Buddhism provides for the separate entities of science and religion, the potential for both to further converge as a set of unexpectedly similar ideologies is a realistic expectation. However, such an intermingling would require a certain collaborative spirit which may only emerge as a result of noting salient consistencies rather than auxiliary dissimilarities. Perhaps it is in this way that the present fascination with the issue of religion and science is misguided—a pervading interest in the assumption of fundamental discrepancies between religion and science appears to have ironically displaced what ultimately characterizes both pursuits: that is, an understanding of the most important features of life and nature.
References


