

## **The biggest thing in the world**

(or, Will science invalidate Buddhism?)<sup>1</sup>

University student, **Jeff D Walker**, in “The interface of Buddhism and science: Will it alter a tradition?”<sup>2</sup> reflects on the possible effects of modern psychology working with Buddhism, in that it

may lead to the invalidation of foundational beliefs of one of the traditions. However, if approached with careful attention and wholesome motivation, the interface of Buddhism and science presents an opportunity to progress toward a healthier society and a deeper understanding of human experience. (Walker 2006:1)

Walker first notes that, like any religion that has left its point of origin—“there comes a point where we can say that, that which has dispersed has been removed from its original context...the ideas of Buddhism shaped the people, and the people shaped the ideas of Buddhism” (id).

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (and in our own times), cultural currency of science in the West has led people to question the authority of Christianity. Buddhist evangelists such as **Anagarika Dharmapala** capitalized on this, declaring at the 1893 Parliament of World Religions in Chicago, that it was Buddhism, not Christianity, that could heal the rift between science and religion.<sup>3</sup>

Such events not only planted the seeds of Buddhism in the West, but also acted as a precedent for an interdisciplinary dialogue between Buddhism and science. Contemporary Tibetan scholar, **Thubten Jinpa**, explains the current argument for such collaboration, first Buddhism’s encountering the physical sciences, and in recent years, engaging with the mind sciences, as follows:

The following key features of Buddhism—its suspicion of any notion of absolutes, its insistence on belief based on understanding, its empiricist philosophical orientation, its minute analysis of the nature of mind and its various modalities, and its overwhelming emphasis on knowledge gained through personal experience—all make it easy for Buddhism to be in a dialogue with a system of thought that emphasizes empirical evidence as the key means of acquiring knowledge. (Jinpa 2003:83)<sup>4</sup>

Even in India, a few centuries after the Buddha’s death, Buddhist innovators began to develop new ideas (such as cosmic Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, and the downplaying of the arhat ideal), and more dramatic developments set in as Buddhism spread across Asia, changing nations and in turn changed by them. And now interfacing with science, Buddhism is further experiencing a renewed assimilation.

Then there is the problem of authenticating our religion. Unlike in the past, when saints were seen to walk the earth and were approachable, this is not so today, where religion has often become a sophisticated status symbol and means of wealth management. One of the most important observations that Walker (see above) makes, I think, is when he says:

Lacking such examples, the Western world turns to the authority of science to validate Buddhist practices. Superficially it may seem as though science is the dominant tradition, and, in order to be recognized as legitimate, Buddhism must have a scientific seal of approval. However, to understand the situation in its entirety one must examine intentions of the researchers, as well as context of the researcher [sic]. (Walker 2006:5)

<sup>1</sup> Source: Meditation and consciousness, SD 17.8c (10.3): <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/17.8c-Meditation-consciousness.-piya1.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> See [http://www.wesleyan.edu/aai/2006\\_summer\\_papers/jwalker.html](http://www.wesleyan.edu/aai/2006_summer_papers/jwalker.html).

<sup>3</sup> Rick Fields, *How the Swans Came to the Lake*, 1981:126 f.

<sup>4</sup> “Science as an ally or a rival philosophy?” In B A Wallace (ed), *Buddhism and Science*. 2003:69-85.

To understand the nature of consciousness is to understand **how the mind works**, but more importantly for practitioners, it reminds us of the immeasurable capacity of the mind for goodness -- or for bad. If we do not consciously choose to direct the mind towards good, we would, as a rule, be autopiloted by our past habits to go on living in the past, perceiving others preta-like as shadows of our past, and drawn beast-like by the future, measuring others asura-like by how much they are worth to us.

There *is* only the present moment. There *was* the past but it is gone. There *will be* a future, maybe; but it was not and is not. Even when we think of the past or yearn for the future, it is happening now. Life's answer and liberation are clearly in the present moment: *life is well lived when we are present as it happens, no matter what happens*. For, this is our consciousness at its best.<sup>5</sup>

The question now is whether we can rise above this consciousness. The Buddha has shown that we can, if we well prepare ourselves for this liberation. However, this is not something easy to talk or write about. It is not even an experience (for all experiences must be in time). True reality is ultimately timeless, time-free.

For, there is nothing we can really change in time: neither the past nor the future, not even the present (Dh 348): this is the changing world.<sup>6</sup> We can only change our attitude towards them, and to live by that vision. If we understand this, then we have a helpful idea of the nature of timelessness of joy and peace, even of awakening.

Let me close with a well known modern Buddhist story based on a poem of the Thai contemplative monk Buddhadasa (1906-1993), entitled "Conversation: The Buddha city" (2010:7, 17). A primary school teacher once asked her class, "**What is the biggest thing in the world?**" A sweet small girl answers, "My daddy." An excited little boy declares, "An elephant," since he likes animals. An older girl proposes, "A mountain." A bespectacled boy replies, "My eye is the biggest thing in the world!" The class holds its breath. Even the teacher does not understand his answer. So the little sage explains, "Well, my eye can see her daddy, an elephant, and a mountain, too. It can also see so much else. If all of that can fit into my eye, then my eye must be the biggest thing in the world!"

However, he is not quite right, we might say. The mind can see everything that our eye can see, and it can also imagine so much more. It can also hear, smell, taste and touch, as well as think. In fact, everything that can be known can fit into the mind. Therefore, the mind must be the biggest thing in the world. The mind contains everything!<sup>7</sup> For the moment, let us give ourselves the benefit of this answer.<sup>8</sup>

Understanding the mind, as such, is the basis of understanding everything. Our minds cannot be fully or properly examined in a lab, even by the most sophisticated instruments. The bottom line is that the mind cannot be fully measured, but can be examined, and better still, *trained*, by us ourselves so that it

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<sup>5</sup> See **Bhadd'eka,ratta Sutta** (M 131), SD 8.9: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/8.9-Bhaddekaratta-S-m131-piya.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> Dh 348: **Ugga,sena Vatthu**, DhA 24.6/4:59-65. See SD 8.9 (5): <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/8.9-Bhaddekaratta-S-m131-piya.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> For Brahmvamso's version, see "Buddhism, the only real science" (2004), where he concludes the story thus: "Science's mistake [that the brain contains the mind] is obvious now. The mind is not in the brain, nor in the body. The brain, the body and the rest of the world, are in the mind!" See "Buddhism, the only real science," Lanka Daily News, 28 Mar 2007: <http://www.buddhistchannel.tv/index.php?id=6,3895,0,0,1,0>. This story is also found in *Opening the Door of Your Heart*, Melbourne: Lothian Books, 2004:150 f. For Nimal Rajapakse's criticism of Brahmvamso's remarks here, see Lanka Daily News, 7 Apr 2007: <http://www.buddhismaustralia.org/science.htm> or <http://www.buddhistchannel.tv/index.php?id=22,3931,0,0,1,0>.

<sup>8</sup> See SD 17.8c (10.3-7.3): <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/17.8c-Meditation-consciousness.-piya1.pdf>.

is liberated from suffering. Using a famous analogy, **William James**<sup>9</sup> observes, in his *Principles of Psychology*, that psychology stubbornly investigates the still water in buckets drawn from the stream of consciousness, while ignoring the flowing stream itself! (1890:255). We are that stream of consciousness, and only we can truly know ourselves.

By the way, there is something *even bigger than the mind*, that is, **love**, or more exactly, lovingkindness, an unconditional acceptance of all life and its ambience. For, it is love that brings us forth into this world. We would not have been here if not for that love. Even more so, the mind or wisdom by itself can be self-centred, but with love, it is fulfilled: for, wisdom shown is love given.<sup>10</sup>

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[an occasional re-look at the Buddha's Example and Teachings]

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<sup>9</sup> On William James and Buddhist psychology, see **Meditation and consciousness**, SD 17.8c (2): <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/17.8c-Meditation-consciousness.-piya1.pdf>.

<sup>10</sup> On lovingkindness (*mettā*), see **Brahma, vihāra**, SD 38.5: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2010/02/38.5-Brahmavihara-piya.pdf>. On how respect (*gāraṇa*) relates to lovingkindness, see **Gāraṇa S** (S 6.2) @ SD 12.3 (1.2.3): <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/12.3-Garava-S-s6.2-piya.pdf>