

Free Buddhism

American author, philosopher, neuroscientist, and founder CEO of Project Reason, Sam Harris, in his thoughtful article, "Killing the Buddha" (2006), writes:

"There is a reason that we don't talk about 'Christian physics' or 'Muslim algebra,' though the Christians invented physics as we know it, and the Muslims invented algebra. Today, anyone who emphasizes the Christian roots of physics or the Muslim roots of algebra would stand convicted of not understanding these disciplines at all. In the same way, once we develop a scientific account of the contemplative path, it will utterly transcend its religious associations. Once such a conceptual revolution has taken place, speaking of 'Buddhist' meditation will be synonymous with a failure to assimilate the changes that have occurred in our understanding of the human mind."¹

Harris champions what is becoming a viable and valuable reality today -- "contemplative science" -- that is how Buddhism should be accepted today, shorn of all its religiosity. I fully agree with Harris that such a contemplative science would bring great and broad benefits to the world as physics and algebra (just to mention the examples he has given) have done. However, let us explore deeper the significance of taking Buddhism as such a "contemplative science."

In his best-seller, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (2004), Harris criticizes organized religion, the clash between religious faith and rational thought, and the problems of tolerance towards religious fundamentalism. In 2006, he published the book *Letter to a Christian Nation*, a response to criticisms of *The End of Faith*. This was followed by *The Moral Landscape* (2010), on the science of morality, then his long-form essay *Lying* (2011), and the short book *Free Will* (2012).

Harris is a well-known contemporary critic of religion and proponent of scientific skepticism and the "New Atheism." If we see history as a human struggle against the abuses and domination of religion (especially the God-religions and church-ed Buddhism), and the rise of scientific knowledge and the free world, then Sam Harris is one of its key proponents. It is on account of the wisdom and courage of people like Sam Harris, over the centuries, that we today are freer and wiser to reject religious evangelism, dogmas and superstitions, for more meaningful and liberated ways of life that respect human dignity and life as a whole.

Most of us would generally agree with Harris that "it is as yet undetermined what it means to be human, because every facet of our culture -- and even our biology itself -- remains open to innovation and insight" (2006). However, those of us familiar with the early Buddhist training in moral virtue would know that to be human is to respect life, live it as happily and freely as possible, valuing truthfulness, and keeping the mind truly calm and clear.²

Not everyone, however, knows the workings of the mind, even our own. But we know enough, Harris declares, "to say that the God of Abraham is not only unworthy of the immensity of creation; he is unworthy even of man... We need to understand how the mind can transform itself from a mere reservoir of greed, hatred, and delusion into an instrument of wisdom and compassion. Students of the Buddha are very well placed to further our understanding on this front, but the religion of Buddhism currently stands in their way." (2006)

Some might argue that the Buddhist tradition is the richest source of contemplative wisdom that any civilization has produced. In a world that has long been terrorized by fratricidal Sky-God religions, the

¹ http://www.samharris.org/site/full_text/killing-the-buddha/.

² See Piya Tan "The Five Precepts Are Universal" (R49): <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/11/R49-08-0924-Five-precepts-are-universal-5.3.pdf>

ascendance of Buddhism would surely be a welcome development. But this will not happen. There is no reason whatsoever to think that Buddhism can successfully compete with the relentless evangelizing of Christianity and Islam. Nor should it try to, claims Harris. The reason is simple: it is a self-destructive process, and we should avoid it at all cost.

It is true that many exponents of Buddhism, most notably the Dalai Lama, observes Harris, have been remarkably willing to enrich, even constrain, their world-view through dialogue with modern science. “But the fact that the Dalai Lama regularly meets with Western scientists to discuss the nature of the mind does not mean that Buddhism, or Tibetan Buddhism, or even the Dalai Lama’s own lineage, is uncontaminated by religious dogmatism.”

Indeed, charges Harris, there are ideas in Buddhism that are “so incredible as to render the dogma of the virgin birth [of Christianity] plausible by comparison.” Even among Western Buddhists, there are college-educated men and women who apparently believe that Guru Rinpoche [Padmasambhava] was actually born from a *lotus!* Many Buddhists even believe that merit or good can be transferred (what about demerit and bad?). This is not the spiritual breakthrough that civilization has been waiting for all these many centuries, laments Harris.

The Buddha’s wisdom is today trapped within the religion of Buddhism. Even in the West, where scientists and Buddhist contemplatives now collaborate in exploring the effects of meditation on the brain and on mental health, Buddhism remains “an utterly parochial concern.” While it may be true enough to say (as many Buddhists allege) that “Buddhism is not a religion,” most Buddhists worldwide simply practise it as such, in naive, petitionary, and superstitious ways as in any other religion. To speak of “Buddhism,” as such, is to give a false impression of the Buddha’s teachings, and will do little, even nothing at all, to educate or benefit civilization in our millennium.

The Buddhism that we often see around us is mostly based on blind faith, like any other religion. To become a genuine Buddhist, following the Buddha’s teaching, then, is to accept Buddhism on sufficient evidence of wholesome benefits.³ The best way to do this is to be a Buddhist contemplative or meditator. Here, in many respects, claims Harris, Buddhism is very much like science. We start by avoiding certain negative behaviours and cultivating positive ones (moral virtue), then using attention in a prescribed way (meditation), we go on to enjoy their benefits (wisdom and mental well-being). Buddhism is thus scientific insofar as we are willing and able to question Buddhism itself, try it for ourselves and enjoy its healthy and liberating benefits.

Ours is a shrinking world where a significant event in one location is within minutes known and seen in other parts. We are so well connected today that our actions are likely to have consequences well beyond our society and time. What such a world most needs right now is a means of embracing the whole human race as our common moral community.

For this, we need an open, non-tribal, non-sectarian way of talking about the full range of human experiences and aspirations. “We need a discourse on ethics and spirituality that is every bit as unconstrained by dogma and cultural prejudice as the discourse of science is. What we need, in fact, is **a contemplative science**, a modern approach to exploring the furthest reaches of psychological well-being.” It goes with-

³ Essentially, this means that we should seek to understand and accept the facts (1) that all things (incl our selves) are impermanent, (2) that we are capable of self-salvation or self-awakening, and (3) that any effort to find solace of salvation outside of ourselves (such as through beliefs, rituals, or vows) is superstition. See Piya Tan, “Superstition” (R251), 2012: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/11/R251-120801-Superstition-87.pdf>, “Breaking free” (R286), 2013: http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/R286-130403-Breaking-free-RB71_rev.pdf

out saying, argues Harris, that we will not develop such a science by attempting to spread “American Buddhism,” or “Western Buddhism,” or “Engaged Buddhism.” Or, any kind of prefixed Buddhism, we might add, because the prefix somehow suppresses, even supplants, what it prefixes.

If Buddhist methodology (moral ethics and meditation) uncovers genuine truths about the mind and the world -- truths like impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and non-self -- these universal truths are not in the least “Buddhist” or religious in any way. (The word “Buddhist” was never used by the Buddha or Buddhist scripture.) Most informed meditators realize this, but most Buddhists do not. In clinging to “Buddhism,” we miss what it is all really about.

Yet, only after being truly Buddhist first, can we let go of Buddhism.⁴ It’s like using a raft or boat to cross a dangerous river: once we’ve crossed over, we do not need the vessel any more. Meantime we need to board the boat⁵ and keep rowing in the right and safe direction.⁶

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

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⁴ See Piya Tan, “You have to be somebody before you can be nobody,” R128, 2010:

<http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/RB14-Somebody-and-nobody1.pdf>

⁵ On the significance of “boarding the boat” (*okkanti*), see eg **the (Anicca) Cakkhu Sutta** (S 25.1) & SD 16.7 (1.6.3.2): <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/16.7-Anicca-Cakkhu-S-s25.1-piya.pdf>.

⁶ See esp “the parable of the raft” in **Alagaddûpama Sutta** (M 22), SD 3.13: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/3.13-Alagaddupama-S-m22-piya.pdf>