

Religion, Buddhism and Science

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There have been many attempts to distinguish religion and science. Some say that religion seeks the higher, ultimate, ‘transcendent’ truth, while science addresses the mundane, apparent—what is called the relative. My view is that both seek the same ultimate truth by different methods. The method of religion is personal experience and teachings that explain it, the method of science is experiment and theory that explains it. These may sound similar, yet they are importantly different. The former is very personal, individual and subjective, the latter is shared, communal and objective.

We must therefore immediately ask whether we can compare these—can science and religion generally, and Buddhism specifically, play nicely together? There are two intimately related fundamental principles of science that basically cannot be violated without grave damage to the entire enterprise: evidence and lack of authority. Hence, we do not believe the words of Einstein or Hawking without confirming evidence, and evidence trumps authority, theory, logical argument, intuition, etc., every time. Can religion generally and Buddhism in particular accept this requirement?

For those who take the words of the Torah, the New Testament, the Koran, Sutras, high Tibetan lamas, or even our own guru as dogmatic gospel to be believed without question, then yes, there is a severe conflict. However, our teachers have told us not to do this. To my mind, the Buddha was clear that we should not trust his words without testing and analysis:

my word should be accepted by the wise only after investigation, not out of respect (for me)—just as gold (is accepted) only after heating, cutting and rubbing. (From the *Kālāmas Sutra*)

Chogyam Trungpa wrote in *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism* (p187-188) in his chapter on shunyata and description of the *Heart Sutra*:

Then Avalokiteshvara spoke with Shariputra, who represents the scientific-minded person or precise knowledge. The teachings of the Buddha were put under Shariputra’s microscope, which is to say that these teachings were not accepted on blind faith but were examined, practiced, tried and proved.

More explicitly, the Dalai Lama has recently written that

My confidence in venturing into science lies in my basic belief that as in science so in Buddhism, understanding the nature of reality is pursued by means of critical investigation: if scientific analysis were conclusively to demonstrate certain claims in Buddhism to be false, then we must accept the findings of science and abandon those claims.

All of us should be seriously questioning, examining, testing and being critically open to what we hear and read. We should not become religious about it all. If we do, we can easily fall prey to dominance by the unscrupulous, and also become vulnerable to debate because we are not rationally convinced of the truth of the teachings, but simply *believe*. That is dangerous. Criticism, discussion and debate are vital to the life of our teachings, just as it is in science and free society generally. Hence, as long as we are open to such critical examination, there should be no conflict between science and Buddhism.

However, some people seem to think that science is scientism, and physics is physicalism. I argue that neither of these are either science or true. Physicalism is the belief that every phenomena can be reduced to its physical components. This is also

called reductionism. Physicists have determined that reductionism is not accurate for many phenomena; there is an emergent holism that cannot be reduced.

Scientism is the belief that science is the only source of knowledge. I addressed that initially to state that I don't believe this to be the case. Science—at least to date—cannot comprehensively understand personal experience. Try coming up with a description of the taste of a strawberry. All concepts fall short. There is—I would argue—non-conceptual knowledge, and science is restricted to a conceptual expression of the results of experimentation. Scientists are really good at drawing maps, but should not forget that it is not the territory. That goes with Buddhists as well—the words of teachings are mere pointing out the nature of reality, not the actual reality. But, we all know that, eh?