

## RELIGION AND SCIENCE

By Ven. Professor Walpola Sri Rahula

*The learned professor draws our attention to certain parallels and similarities between Buddhist Philosophy and Modern Science. He, however, states that religion and science are basically two different things. The former has a heart; the latter has not. In particular, it is unthinkable to compare Buddhism (Buddha's Teachings) with modern science and secular philosophy: for science is a study, an intellectual pastime while Buddhism is a practice in life....a teaching to live.*

*This was the subject of the Convocation Address at the University of Kelaniya Sri Lanka delivered by the professor as its Chancellor.*

*The Ven. Dr. Rahula is a well-known figure in the Buddhist world.*

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The period in which we live is dominated by the amazing achievements in the field of science and technology. We can all be justly proud of these accomplishments. Man has set foot on the moon and walked on what his ancestors, according to ancient texts, had revered as a heavenly being. Man spends months in space capsules. He is probing the distant planets and stars. All these 'miracles' are performed by the power of scientific knowledge and technology. Our daily life, every aspect of it, is permeated by science. We have almost become creatures or slaves of science and technology. Soon we shall be worshipping it. Early symptoms of it are that we tend to seek support from science to prove the validity of our religions, to justify them and to make them modern, up-to-date, respectable and acceptable.

It is not surprising *therefore* that some well-intentioned Buddhist monks as well as some Buddhist laymen are making an ill-advised effort to prove that Buddhism is a scientific religion. It is true that there are some parallels and similarities between Buddhist philosophy and modern science. These are intellectually very stimulating, interesting and exciting, even astounding. But they are peripheral and do not touch the essential part, the centre, the core, the heart of Buddhism.

Let us consider very briefly some of these parallels and similarities:

Asanga, a great Mahayana Buddhist philosopher-monk of the 4th century A.C., speaking of the atom (*paramanu*) says that it has no physical body or bodily form (*nihsarira*). The atom is conceived by the intellect (*buddhi*) through the ultimate analysis of matter.<sup>1</sup> The concept of the atom in modern physics is in keeping with this definition given in an ancient Buddhist philosophical text written in Sanskrit almost sixteen centuries ago.

I was once invited by a scientist friend to visit Saclay, a nuclear research centre not far from Paris. I showed this “Buddhist definition” of the atom to some of the physicists working there and asked them what they thought about it. They said that even today they had not gone beyond this definition. It is true that the atom has no physical form, it cannot be seen or touched, its existence is conceived by the mind, it is a concept, they agreed.

It is surprising how this Buddhist monk of the 4th century could define the atom to agree so closely with modern physics. He was not a physicist and was not interested in physical science. He was a spiritual man, a philosopher, who saw things as they were (*yathabhutam*). How did he arrive at this definition? Not with the help of any external fabricated instrument. The “instrument” he would have used was his insight developed and purified by meditation (*bhavana*).

According to Buddhist philosophy, as interpreted by the same Asanga in his *Abhidharma-samuccaya*, time (*kala*) is only a designation, a name (*prajnapti*), for the uninterrupted continuity of cause and effect (*hetuphalaprabandhapravrtti*).<sup>2</sup> Space (*akasa*) is that in which all activity (*sarvavrtya-avakasata*), that is the uninterrupted continuity of cause and effect, takes place.<sup>3</sup> That means there is no time separate from space where all activity, the continuity of cause and effect, occurs. They are all inseparably interconnected and interrelated. Nothing called time exists by itself.

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1. **Abhidarmasamuccaya** of Asanga, edited by Pralhad Pradhan, Visvabharati, Santiniketan 1950, p. 41,

**Le Compendium de la Super-Doctrine (Philosophie) (Abhidarmasamuccaya)** d’ Asanga, traduit par Walpola Rahula, Ecole Francaise d’Extreme-Orient, Paris 1971, p. 66.

2. Pradhan, **Abhidarmasamuccaya**, p. 11.

Rahula, **Le Compendium de la Super-Doctrine**, p. 16.

3. Pradhan, **Abhidarmasamuccaya**, p. 13.

Rahula, **Le Compendium de la Super-Doctrine**, p. 19.

Is this not an anticipation, sixteen centuries earlier, of Einstein's Theory of Relativity, which even the scientists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century found difficult to grasp conceptually? Einstein enunciated that time is not a separate entity. Time and space are interconnected and interrelated. In the Theory of Relativity you cannot talk about space without talking about time and *vice versa*. That means nothing called time exists by itself.

Buddhism does not stop there. It goes a step further and says that there is a state which is beyond cause-effect and beyond space-time (*akalika, Kalavimutta*). That is the ultimate absolute "Truth" called *Nirvana*, which is outside the scope of physical science.

The pre-nineteenth century scientists, who could not grasp the ideas contained in the Theory of Relativity, saw the world as a machine. With the advent of Quantum mechanics, the mechanical view of the universe had to be further abandoned, especially at atomic and sub-atomic levels. The new scientific view that emerged no longer saw the world as a machine consisting of separate objects, "but rather as an organic whole or a network, a web of relationships, which included the observer in a very essential way."

May I emphasize once more that this latest scientific world view is not new to Buddhist philosophy, because it was clearly and precisely taught by the Buddha 2500 years ago in his doctrine of *Paticcasamuppada* (Skt. *Pratityasamutpada*), Dependent Origination or Conditioned Genesis. According to this doctrine, the whole of existence, including our life, is a network of interrelations, of cause and effect. One thing arises and ceases depending on the arising and ceasing of another thing. Nothing, animate or inanimate, in the whole universe, is independent; nothing, not even a particle, exists in isolation by itself. All phenomena, all things including our life, are interdependent and interrelated.

Now to go back to the idea of the atom as a concept which cannot be seen or touched, but only conceived by the mind. Since the world is made up of atoms, it too is, essentially and ultimately, nothing more than a concept.

This idea was clearly and explicitly expressed in Buddhist philosophy many centuries before modern science was born by none other than the younger brother of Asanga whom I referred to earlier. He was Vasubandhu, an equally celebrated Buddhist philosopher-monk (4th Century A.C.), who developed, according to the original teaching of the Buddha, a philosophy called *vijnati-matrata* or *citta-matrata*. *Vijnapti-matrata* means "just a designation", "just a name", "only a name". *Citta-matrata* means "just a thought", "just an idea", "only an idea". This branch of Buddhist philosophy, which is highly developed, demonstrates in great detail that the world, the universe, is only a designation, only a name, only an idea. It goes further and postulates that not only the external world, but also our mind itself is a designation, only a name.

As stated earlier, these are interesting and exciting for intellectual discussions, but they do not touch real religion. It is fruitless, meaningless, to seek support from science to *prove* religious truths. All religions agree, as far as we know, that love is nobler, superior, and worthier than hatred. This can be considered as the heart of religion. But this simple, basic, moral truth universally accepted by all religions, cannot be proved by science in a laboratory as a moral value. In a laboratory it can be proved that hatred is harmful and love is beneficial physically by observing the changes in body chemistry and other physiological effects. However, this does not illuminate us on “what” love or hate means in a moral sense. In religion the scope is wider. Religion explains what love and hate are and their moral and ethical values, their good and bad effects on oneself, on one’s family and relatives, and on one’s neighbours and on one’s society and so on, and comes to the simple moral truth that love is nobler than hatred. This is beyond science. The Buddha says that the Ultimate Truth is beyond logic (*atakkavacara*). So are religious truths beyond science. Scientific concepts constantly change, but religious truths do not. It is incongruous and preposterous to depend on changing scientific concepts to prove or support perennial religious truths.

Science and religion are two different things. Their aims and functions are dissimilar. Science is interested in the precise analysis and study of the material world. It has no heart. It knows nothing about love or compassion, righteousness or purity of mind. It is not concerned with moral, ethical and spiritual values. It does not know the internal, spiritual world of man; it knows only the external, material world that surrounds him.

On the contrary religion, particularly Buddhism, aims at the discovery and study of man’s inner world; ethical, spiritual, psychological and intellectual world. Buddhism is a spiritual and psychological discipline that deals with man *in toto*. It is a way of life; it is a path to follow and practise. It teaches man how to develop his moral and ethical character (*sila*), how to discipline and cultivate his mind (*samadhi*), and how to obtain wisdom (*panna*) to realize the Ultimate Truth, *Nirvana*. It teaches man to abstain from evil, practise good and to purify his mind. Buddhism consists not only of the study and knowledge (*pariyatti*), but also practice (*patipatti*), and of the realization of Truth (*pativedha*). These are the three pillars on which the edifice of Buddhism stands. Knowledge without practice is condemned as useless and profitless. Physical science is not concerned about these spiritual matters and does not claim to be so.

It is unwise to extrapolate scientific findings beyond the limited framework on which even the scientists fear to tread. This is a pitfall that we should carefully avoid.

We should never forget that scientists have rendered a tremendous service to the material progress of mankind, which is very important, and we should ever be grateful to them. But what the Buddha and other religious teachers like Jesus Christ have done for humanity is far deeper and nobler. It is their teachings that have given humanness and dignity to man. If we forget the moral path laid down by those great spiritual leaders, if we deviate from that path of righteousness and justice, then one day we will behave without human dignity and nobleness, we will see one another as animals, hate one another and destroy one another with weapons, as an ancient Buddhist text warns.<sup>4</sup> One can have a glimpse into the future of the destructive path being taken in the development of technology devoid of ethics.

It is not science that can save humanity; if at all, it is these moral teachings that can influence the use of science and technology not for destruction but for construction. If this moral path is forgotten, ignored and abandoned, and if humanity is left in the care of science, science which has no heart, no compassion or moral values, will destroy humanity. Already it is heading towards that end. Many of today's scientists and engineers are financed by military funds and are working for military objectives often unaware of this. They are employing the potential of their creativity to devise weapons of greater power for destruction.

To seek support from science to prove religious truths and to say that religion must be scientific is beside the point. Religion is above and beyond science, and the two are on two different levels and spheres. A fusion between religion and science is essentially and intrinsically inconceivable.

Just as some seek support from modern science to prove that Buddhism is scientific, there are others, popular preachers and writers, who are prone to bring modern professional philosophers and writers to give evidence to prove the validity of the Buddha's teaching. These people with good intentions quote passages and saying from books to show that what the Buddha thought 2500 years ago is true. But they do not realize that when they produce a modern philosopher or writer as evidence to defend or justify the Buddha, the witness becomes more important and more reliable than the Buddha himself. What if these modern philosophers whom they quote did not agree with the Buddha? Would they conclude that the Buddha was wrong and those philosophers were right? The Fully Enlightened and Perfect One does not need the support or

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4. **Cakkavattisihanada-sutta** of the **Digha-nikaya**

protection of those professional, worldly philosophers and writers. He can stand alone. If they agree with the Buddha, so much the better.

Furthermore, certain scholars like to examine the Buddha and some modern philosopher considering them, as it were, as equals or “colleagues” in the same field of study. They do not see that to put on the same platform or on the same footing, the Buddha and a philosopher or a scientist, however celebrated he may be, is a gross disrespect to the Great Teacher. When you compare the Buddha with a modern philosopher you reduce at once the incomparable Master’s stature and greatness. The Buddha is the embodiment of Great Compassion (*maha-karuna*) and Great Wisdom (*maha-prajna*).

The Buddha should not be lumped with philosophers and scientists. He was an unequalled (*asama*) spiritual leader who showed the Way for man’s emancipation from suffering. He was not interested in profitless, philosophical and metaphysical discussions. In fact, it is well-known, he refused on several occasions to discuss such questions as to whether the universe is finite or infinite, saying that they were not relevant to the problem of man’s liberation from suffering, this attainment of freedom and peace, and his realization of Nirvana.

Comparing the Buddha’s teaching with modern science and secular philosophy entails also a subtle risk of reducing Buddhism to a mere school of thought similar to the Greek Schools of philosophy. It can become an intellectual pastime. Ancient Greek philosophy or modern Western philosophy is for the study and intellectual discussion; it is not specifically for practice, nor to follow as a way of life. Buddhism is not only a study deeply intellectual; it is more importantly, primarily and essentially a practice in life, a Way to follow, a Path to thread, a teaching to live.