

The source of sustainability

A review of
Toward Sustainable Science: A Buddhist look at trends in scientific development
 by P.A. Payutto
 Buddhadhamma Foundation, 1993

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This book is based on a lecture given by P.A. Payutto to the Faculty of Science at Chiang Mai University in Thailand. Payutto is a Thai monk in the Theravada Buddhist tradition. The lecture was translated into English by Bruce Evans and first published in 1993. This book offers a critique of the shortsightedness of science (in omitting ethics and in not fully acknowledging the human mind), gives a critique of the Christian approach (or what Payutto portrays as being the Christian approach), and then points out the benefits science and humanity could reap by employing a Buddhist approach to science.

In search of absolute ethics

Payutto defines ethics: ‘... actions are good and appropriate when they are in harmony with the way things are’ (p. 76). And yet, his view of reality is one in which ‘self’ is a mistaken concept: ‘The concept of self causes a lot of confusion when people try to look at reality as an actual condition with minds still trapped in habitual thinking, which clings fast to concepts. The two perspectives clash. The perception is of a doer and a receiver of results. While in reality there is only feeling, the perception is of “one who feels.” (In the texts it is said: “There is the experience of feeling, but no-one who feels”)’ (p. 50).

Buddhism places value on human beings not because we are made in the image of God and have the potential to repent and be purified of our sins, but because of the perceived potential of people to attain enlightenment and nirvana. In Buddhism the goal is to escape from the wheel of suffering by being extinguished, whereas the goal in Christianity is to be redeemed and rejuvenated through repentance and divine renewal. Does the Buddhist ethic help people improve their life situations? When the goal is extinction many people figure they’ll just hang around for a while longer and do as they please while they’re at it. In the hearts of people there’s a hunger to continue and to find purpose in life. Not wanting to be reincarnated into a bad situation next time though, they will put some restraints on themselves. Is the Buddhist ethic really in harmony with the way things are? It becomes a matter of human opinion, humans which Buddhists ironically claim have no ‘self’. If everything exists apart from a divine initiative, why is it worse to kill a frog than to kill a human? Buddhists would say it takes a higher level of malicious effort to kill a human and the human also has greater potential for attaining to nirvana than the frog. But if everything is just a matter of human opinion, then why is nirvana the highest good? Many people would prefer to continue living. In the end no absolute standard for morality emerges.

Approaches to science

Payutto categorizes modern scientists into four main categories based on their approach to reality. To summarize broadly, these are:

1. Those who believe science can answer all questions;
2. Those who believe science can answer all questions except those pertaining to the mind;



3. Those who believe Eastern religions hold keys for future scientific research; and
4. Those who believe ‘the material world is one level of reality contained within the realm of the mind’ (pp. 75–76).

Payutto doesn’t acknowledge anywhere in this book, the great contribution of the many ‘founding father’ scientists who due to their belief in a creator accomplished so much. In fact he criticizes Newton for being heavily influenced by values and not having a strong heart. Ironically, in spite of Payutto’s ‘no self’ belief, he places great emphasis on mind development—getting rid of anger, desire, and delusion. While Newton probably could have been more strong hearted, it’s an even greater tribute to his belief in God, that with such a world view, even this ‘weak’ man could accomplish so much.

Payutto attempts to show that Eastern religions—especially Buddhism, can lead the way for modern science, while Christianity is characterized as a destructive world view. In support of his view he quotes Einstein, who praised Buddhism. Payutto does acknowledge some limits here though:

‘However, I don’t wish to place too much emphasis on whether Bud-

dhism really is the foundation of science or not. It might be better, in fact, to change the title of this talk, to something like ... "What would a science which is based on Buddhism be like?"' (p. 84).

In pointing out an essential element of Buddhism, Payutto says, 'No matter where Buddhism spreads to, or how distorted the teaching becomes, this emphasis on human endeavor never varies. If this one principle is missing, we can confidently say that it is no longer Buddhism' (p. 38).

In his only mention of evolution in this book, Payutto says, 'Buddhism believes that human beings are the highest evolution of nature, and so encompass the entire spectrum of reality within themselves' (p. 61). From these quotes it almost seems that Buddhism is sheer humanism, or merely philosophy. However, since there are many references to the miraculous in the Pali Canon (the doctrinal source for Theravada Buddhists), and since the idea of a creator is refused in these same texts, it would be more accurate to place Buddhism in the realm of religion. In spite of this, some Buddhists do lean more towards the philosophical side of Buddhism. Using heavenly beings in the Pali Canon as an example, Payutto doesn't seem concerned if these texts are disproven:

'We are always ready to accept the truth, whether it is eventually proven that heavenly beings do exist or they do not, and our way of life will in no way be affected by such a discovery' (p. 98).

This sounds very objective and altruistic, but if this would be 'a science which is based on Buddhism'-one in which proving or disproving truth claims is inconsequential, how can this lead to scientific progress, much less meaningful living?

In another book of his (*Thai Buddhism in the Buddhist World*, 2001), Payutto quotes Donald K. Swearer as saying,

'Buddhism is more scientific than other religions, especially theism (viz., Christianity); there is

a general agreement between the approach or method of Buddhism and science; and, science proves or validates particular Buddhist teachings such as the doctrines of rebirth (samsara) and impermanence (anicca)' (p. 177).

This is quite a claim, but does it stand up to examination? If Buddhism is so scientific, why were most of the branches of modern science founded by creationists? If re-birth is so scientific, why aren't there millions or billions of examples of this (this situation is akin to the complete lack of 'missing link' fossils)?²

Comments on Christianity

In this book, Payutto portrays the Christian approach as being destructive to the environment and to the development of science. To do so however, he does not accurately represent what Christian beliefs are: 'In later times, during the Dark Ages, this desire to know was actively suppressed by the Christian Church and the Inquisition' (p. 12). Actually, this was not the 'Christian Church,' but the Catholic Church acting on un-Christian principles and also suppressing biblical principles. In *Thai Buddhism in the Buddhist World*, Payutto reports on the results of the Second Vatican Council,

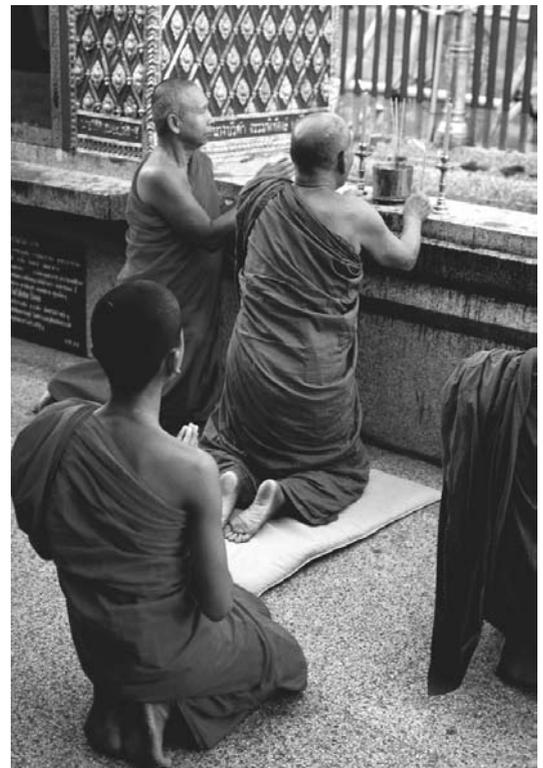
'Today, it is natural to see a Christian priest paying respect to a Buddha-image or a Buddhist monk; Christian nuns attending a merit-making ceremony or listening to a sermon in a Buddhist monastery-hall ...' (pp. 116-117).

In the latter case, Payutto seems to praise Catholics, while in the former he uses their history to discredit Christianity. The latter quote shows how Catholicism is different from Bible-based Christianity. To try to use the Catholic Church to disprove biblical Christianity is like trying to disprove

Theravada Buddhism (closer to the original, and to which Payutto belongs) by showing aberrant examples of Mahayana Buddhism (contains more late developed traditions).

Payutto also makes reference to the book of Genesis as a justification for Christians to subjugate and manipulate nature. Strangely, although he uses the Old Testament as his point of reference, he doesn't directly malign Judaism or Islam (except for saying 'theistic religions'), but does specify Christianity as the culprit several times. Obviously there's a big difference between being in authority and abusing authority. While Christians do believe humans have authority over nature, there are many Bible verses to steer believers towards using this authority with care. In Carl Wieland's article 'Fouling the Nest,' he puts the Christian view in proper context:

'God owns the Earth, not man, so as responsible stewards we are not free to do as we please with it (Psalm 24:1). But we have also been given dominion (rule) over it, and told to subdue it for our own needs (Genesis 1:26-28).



Is Buddhism more scientific than Christianity?

Mankind, not the California Cockroach, is, after all, the purpose of Creation. But man was required to dress and keep the garden, not plunder it (Genesis 2:15). Beyond that, our attempts as Christians to make decisions on environmental matters can, in each case, be based on a pragmatism born of concern for others, and on wisdom (James 1:5), refined and informed by the best available scientific data on these continually changing and complex issues.⁷³

Conclusion

In the Theravada Buddhist tradition, Sakyamuni Buddha (a.k.a. Siddhartha Gottama), is believed to have been only a human being. He is seen as a sort of scientist in the spiritual realm- experimenting, and coming up with theories and hypothesis. The substance of his claims are drawn from experience. If a person asks too many questions about the doctrines, they will be encouraged to ‘just try meditating and see for yourself.’ Some critical reflection is encouraged in Buddhism, such as the Kalama Sutta passage, which warns people not to believe something just from hearsay, or due to the reputation of a great teacher, etc., but the basis for verifying something is then to experience it for oneself. To assume that this is the basis for verifying something breaks the rules of the Kalama Sutta, by trusting the teacher who says that this is the way to verify something. But, it also abandons a person to the undependable and subjective whims of their emotions. Although omniscience is claimed for him, there were some questions about life and even pertaining to the goal of Buddhism, which Sakyamuni refused to answer (Culamalunkyovada Sutta M.I.428). Experience is to be depended upon in spite of the state of delusion that is claimed for mankind, and in spite of the claim of having no permanent ‘self’ with which to experience these things. While Payutto is rightly concerned with technology and science which is greed driven and doesn’t help

people with their deepest needs, he has not looked deeply enough to see the best source of sustainability—God, who made this world and who knows the best ways to proceed. Our highest purpose in life is not escape (nirvana), but redemption through confession of our sins and a right relationship with our Creator. Amen.

References

1. <answersingenesis.org/docs/270.asp>, 17 November, 2003.
2. Ernest Valea has written some excellent articles showing some of the mistaken assumptions concerning ‘re-birth cases.’ <comparativereligion.com/reincarnation.html>, 17 November, 2003.
3. <answersingenesis.org/creation/v24/i1/fouling.asp>, 17 November, 2003.

The lamentable truth

‘... we must concede that there are presently no detailed Darwinian accounts of the evolution of any biochemical system, only a variety of wishful speculations.’

Franklin H.,
The Way of the Cell,
Oxford University Press,
2001.

Did Darwin let the evidence speak?

‘In his *Autobiography* he [Darwin] also said, perhaps to be in line with current fashion, but far from accurately, that he ‘worked on true Baconian principles, and without any theory collected facts on a wholesale scale’. The truth was that the central element in his scientific approach was a passion for theorising, and although he admitted that reasoning was a serious fault while making an observation, he always maintained that it was essential *both beforehand* and afterwards’ [emphasis added].

Keynes, R.,
Fossils, finches and Fuegians:
Charles Darwin’s adventures
and discoveries on the Beagle,
HarperCollins Publishers,
p. 398, 2002.