

CORRELATION BETWEEN MODERN SCIENCE AND BUDDHISM

The four questions posed, can be approached from the concept of the four noble truths, as proposed by Prof. Wright in the lectures during this course. The four noble truths are connected and follow from one another; this essay deals with all four elements, integrating examples and findings of the various scientific experiments and studies mentioned¹.

The Human predicament reaches further than just “suffering” or Dukkha, as it preys on our wish to seek pleasure, and the prevailing human trait² on how to make it “last”, preferably never to cease; consequently falling into the trap of “clinging and craving”.

In the pursuit of “happiness”, studies are ongoing in the field of neuro-science to establish regions where brain activity is measurable to prove that the effects of gratification of those pleasures and their continuation give answers on why we chase these rainbows³. Whilst these studies show that people winning large sums of money have to deal with the illusion that they will happily live ever after, sad conclusions show that they end up worse off; emotionally and materially. Buddhism offers significant insight in how to counteract the pitfalls that any form of attachment brings us⁴.

In the various fields of Psychology, the Buddhist view encompasses mindfulness and the detachment from the delusory characteristics of emotions⁵, contradicting the basic principle of Evolutionary Psychology and parallels drawn from this specific field of Psychology.

Whereas *Buddhist ideas find support in how the mind works*, discussions on the fora and FB media suggest that multi-disciplinary Psychological studies indicate that a number of interpretations need to be considered (footnotes 1-4);

The mind works on various levels, incorporating past experiences, positive or negative, that are stored in our memory banks⁶ and colour our perception. The interpretation and imaginations we may be subject to are a direct result of these perceptions influencing our behaviour and actions. Modern Behavioural and Cognitive Psychology acknowledge these phenomena, and go as far as to say that there is no central directive in our minds that steer our behaviour, but the very actions are “directed” by the combination of signals of certain modules of the brain⁷.

The most enlightening part of this⁸ is the way we perceive ourselves; studies have shown that we tend to think of ourselves in unsubstantiated overly positive ways⁹, and in this respect Buddhist views are shared in terms of pointing out that we should not engage in bias perceptions, but remain critical of what we perceive as the truth¹⁰. Adopting “Spin Doctors”¹¹ to allow for “twisting” our perception to suit the purpose, is an important feature in “coping” with contradictory motions on life’s path.

To engage in a more realistic and truth-seeking mindset is to exercise meditation, a form and discipline which can lead us to Nirvana, or rather; liberation from our own delusions, anxieties and misconceptions, and at the same time in by being mindful of the suffering of others.

Modern Psychology supports the introspective aspects in their various fields of studies; there are numerous research analyses on the neurological changes that occur when meditation is

¹ Lectures week 4, and readings: Robert Kurzban, Why Everyone (Else) is a Hypocrite and Principle 4 in “Evolutionary Psychology: A Primer,” by Leda Cosmides & John Tooby: <http://www.cep.ucsb.edu/primer.html>

² <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Utilitarianism> and Paul Bloom, *How Pleasure Works*,

³ http://www.ted.com/talks/dan_gilbert_asks_why_are_we_happy - Dan Gilbert

⁴ <http://www.amazon.com/Buddhas-Brain-Practical-Neuroscience-Happiness/dp/1572246952>

⁵ Lectures week 1, video lecture 4. and reference to T. Wilson’s Strangers to ourselves

⁶ T. D. Wilson – Strangers to Ourselves (Somatic Markers)

⁷ Lectures week 4, video lecture 3 (Kenrick)

⁸ Lectures week 5 and 6: Bloom, Salzberg and Bhikkhu Bodhi – video interviews

⁹ *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (Vol. 77, No. 6) – D. Dunning and J. Kruger, see also

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Illusory_superiority (Social Psychology studies- Illusory superiority)

¹⁰ http://www.sophia-project.org/uploads/1/3/9/5/13955288/buddhism_noself.pdf

¹¹ T. D. Wilson – Strangers to ourselves (Spin Doctors): <http://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674013827>

applied, which proves that the actual brain activity¹² and circuits change. One of these recognised states is identified as the Default Network Mode¹³, a “state of mind” that is achieved when the mind is free to “wander”, and Buddhist view states that “Wisdom encompasses the knowledge to perceive what emotions are valid, and are deceptive by nature”¹⁴.

In exercising meditation, opportunities arise to alleviate minds from pre-conceived ideas and influential biases that will not give the objectivity needed to perceive matters for their true nature, and will continue to send distracting messages to our neuron receptors. By applying the five aggregates however, it is possible to achieve levels of contemplation of ourselves, others and our environment, that will enable us to view matters from a higher plain or to become a mere vessel in which we just allow thoughts and emotions to drift, which will also evaporate with time....

Adopting the introspective mode meditation offers, and the self-awareness this brings, provides for a sense of formless state – dissolving of the matter – ultimately leading to self-detachment, alignment to a sense of emptiness. In Buddhist terms a definition of the concept of No-Self, including perceptions relating to selfishness, self-centeredness, self-interest and self-deception¹⁵.

Whether Modern Psychology can *support moral validity* that Buddhism promotes is a matter of debate. Many Psychologists argue that even though it has been proven that by intensive and disciplined meditation changes in mindset, attitudes and moral codes are calibrated, Behavioural Psychologists are not convinced and state that Psychopathic and Sociopathic tendencies¹⁶ stem from disturbed attachment problems (Schema Psychotherapy¹⁷).

The question here lies in the fact that it would be nearly impossible to instill a sense of moral awareness in one that has not been able to experience emotions like love, compassion and empathy themselves from an early age onward, and could therefore by any means of behavioural therapy or meditation not be remedied in filling that specific void. Others argue that amazing results have been achieved by means of Vipassana Meditation and Mindfulness methodologies in prisons and schools¹⁸.

Despite the tendency in our societies to take less time to evaluate what we are doing, and why we are doing it – or what the moral implications are – it is evident that there seems to be an increasing awareness to change our ways. This change isn’t as rebellious as Buddhism vs. Evolutionary Psychology, but is nevertheless as dramatic, and even traumatic, as it involves an inner change of all individuals that would rise to the challenge and take responsibility for their own choice in seeking a way to end suffering.

As the mainstream of Professor Wright’s seemed to point toward the rebellion Buddhism poses to Evolutionary Psychology, I would like to summarise this essay with words of the man himself, Charles Darwin: ““It is our arrogance, our admiration of ourselves....”, which may be the primary cause of Universal Dukkha.

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¹² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brain_activity_and_meditation, Week 5, video lecture 3: R. Smith “Awakening, the paradigm shift of the heart”.

¹³ http://scholar.google.nl/scholar?q=default+network+brain&hl=en&as_sdt=0&as_vis=1&oi=scholart&sa=X&ei=SVpiU_iBO4LcOd-jgagB&sqj=2&ved=0CCoQgQMwAA

¹⁴ Week 2, video lecture 4

¹⁵ <http://akke-myrielle.tumblr.com/post/81879903671/buddhism-in-modern-psychology-princeton-university> - R. Kuzban: <http://bloggingheads.tv/videos/22408>

¹⁶ <http://psycnet.apa.org/psycinfo/2005-11002-000>

¹⁷ <http://www.schematherapy.com/>

¹⁸ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w1_DVac9kkl