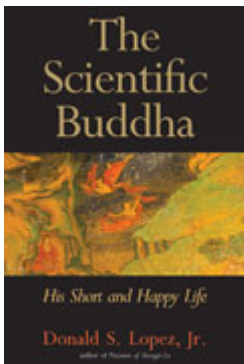


Are Buddhism and science incompatible?

Paul Knitter | Jul. 3, 2013



THE SCIENTIFIC BUDDHA: HIS SHORT AND HAPPY LIFE

By Donald S. Lopez Jr.

Published by Yale University Press, \$25

Donald Lopez is on a mission. In his role as a scholar, he feels called to protect, preserve, and defend the religion that he studies. More specifically in this book, he seeks resolutely to protect and defend the old Buddha from the scientific Buddha.

Who is this scientific Buddha who, in Lopez's view, is threatening, bleaching, domesticating the message of the original Buddha? It's the Buddha discovered by critical, Enlightenment Europeans who thought they found a religion without God, based only on experience and reason. Nowadays, it's the Buddha who is presented as not only compatible with, but a harbinger of, the discoveries of quantum physics and even biological evolution. Most recently, it's the Buddha whose teachings on the benefits of meditation are being confirmed by neurological research and by movements such as mindfulness-based stress reduction.

Lopez will have none of this. Yes, he recognizes that Asian Buddhists used this made in Europe scientific Buddha to trump missionary accusations that Buddhism was superstitious and world-denying. (More recently, Pope John Paul II made the latter charge.) But Lopez finds that the real and timeless message of Buddha is radically incompatible with science. Thus, while the life of this scientific Buddha may have been helpful and happy, Lopez wants to make sure that it is short and consigned to nirvana as promptly as possible.

With his somewhat rambling presentation, heavy on Buddhist history but light on scientific specificity, it's not always easy to pin down just where the incompatibility lies. He appeals to the Dalai Lama in arguing for a dissonance between the randomness that is integral to both quantum physics and natural selection on the one hand and the Buddhist understanding of karma on the other. Also, in light of the central Buddhist teaching that all sentient beings are really no-selves, Lopez concludes that evolution for Buddhists is not aimed at the survival of species but at their extinction. Finally, he argues that Buddhism holds to an anti-scientific strict dualism between mind and matter.

Regarding all the contemporary marketing of Buddhist meditation as the panacea for societal stress, Lopez

insists that it is inaccurate to assume that Buddhist meditation is encompassed by something called mindfulness. He writes, "No other Buddha in the past has taught stress reduction." Indeed, Lopez claims that the "preliminary practices" in all the meditation manuals of Tibetan Buddhism actually increase stress through their lurid descriptions of the sufferings of the human condition (samsara).

One can, and I think must, argue with Lopez about his specific incompatibilities between science and Buddhism. For instance, randomness may result from a karmic causality beyond comprehension; Buddha clearly denied that the "no-self" meant extinction; and if Buddha insisted that his whole message dealt mainly with the reduction of "suffering," that probably included "stress."

Overall, Lopez sounds a bit like an evangelical Christian who defiantly announces the incompatibility of scientific truth and biblical truth. Here, Lopez the Buddhist scholar is at odds with many Buddhist practitioners and teachers (most of whom are also scholars) who are exploring the resonance between Buddhism and science. Foremost among them is the Dalai Lama, who in his *The Universe in a Single Atom: The Convergence of Science and Spirituality*, makes a statement that would send shivers down the spine of any Christian or Buddhist who seeks refuge in the incompatibility of science and religion: "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."

But if I must quibble with Lopez's "incompatibilities" between Buddhism and science, I stand in awe of what he describes as Buddha's "counter-evolutionary" and "radical challenge to the way we see the world." He finds that challenge encapsulated in the two core teachings of wisdom and compassion. Buddha in his wisdom calls us to realize that our deepest happiness consists not in living as individuals but as co-participants in a pervasive, ever-changing interconnectedness. To really live interconnectedly would mean "the eradication of the selfish gene." It would tell us, as many contemporary evolutionary biologists are now arguing, that the "fittest" who survive are not the most selfish but the most cooperative. The compassionate gene can replace the selfish gene.

Lopez condenses Buddha's countercultural challenge by citing two verses from Shantideva's Way of the Bodhisattva: "Whatever happiness there is in the world all arises from the wish for others' happiness. Whatever suffering there is in the world all arises from the wish for one's own happiness."

Compassion can win out over greed. However compatible that may be with science, it's a message our present world would do well to consider.

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