

Buddhist Brain

"The Science of Enlightenment, the Enlightenment of Science"

Public talk by Shinzen Young
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Shinzen Young talks to writer Anna Mirocha for *Tucson Weekly*.

Q: How is the path to enlightenment "science-like"?

A: There are many paths to enlightenment and some of them are actually quite *unscientific*. However, the approach to enlightenment found in the original teaching of the Buddha and preserved to this day as Mindfulness Meditation is in many ways remarkably "science-like." In fact, it is probably the most science-like of any spiritual path hitherto discovered. So the question then becomes in what ways is this early Buddhist approach to enlightenment science-like?

I would say in at least two ways. First, the Buddha encouraged a healthy skepticism. In this regard, he is unique among the founders of the great religions. He explicitly told his students that they need not believe something merely because he (or some sacred scripture) claimed it to be so.

Second and equally remarkable, the Buddha independently discovered the analytic (divide and conquer) strategy which underlies much of the "nuts and bolts" of actual science. Here's what I mean. Much of science boils down to a two-step process. Step one is to figure out the basic components of the system you are trying to understand. Step two is to trace out how those components work together in real time to create complex phenomenon. The Buddha achieved enlightenment by applying this method to the question of how the sense of a separate self arises moment by moment from elementary sensory events such as thoughts and body sensations.

Q: Can you name a few different, concrete ways science might contribute to Buddhism and some ways Buddhism might contribute to science?

A: Science can help Buddhism in a couple of ways. First, if it turns out that scientific evidence strongly validates the beneficial effects of Mindfulness practice, this would motivate large societal institutions, such as schools, businesses, and hospitals to make Mindfulness part of their programs. An example of such research is a preliminary result from Harvard indicating that Mindfulness Meditation increases the gray matter in the brain in a way that seems to be the reverse of its loss in aging.

Second, scientific research on the effects of meditation may reveal radical new ways to look upon enlightenment itself and perhaps more efficient ways to achieve it. Maybe someday in the future, meditation as I and my colleagues now teach it will be as obsolete as the horse and buggy!

I know that may sound somewhat far out and perhaps even sacrilegious, but consider the following. The Buddha claimed that enlightenment arises automatically as soon as something he called “craving” is worked through deeply enough and broadly enough. At this time all over the world, the power of the scientific method is being brought to bear on the neurophysiology of addiction and compulsion. Most of this research is directed at specific instances of craving, i.e., for opiates, alcohol, and so forth. However, the holy grail of science is always to develop a deep and broad unified theory of what’s really going on. If the Buddha was right, then a truly general scientific theory of craving would encompass enlightenment as a corollary and perhaps suggest radically new approaches to achieving it.

On the other hand, Buddhism can contribute to science by helping scientists become better scientists. For one thing, meditation increases one’s baseline of concentration power. Concentration ability is the single most empowering and universally applicable skill any human being can attain. A scientist with meditation skills can be much more effectively focused on any endeavor they may undertake. Furthermore, meditation allows one to deal more effectively with emotions and interpersonal relationships that can sometimes stymie the process of science. Finally, meditation increases intellectual clarity and vitality (more gray matter?) A case in point is myself. I know for a fact that I have very little native ability in mathematics or quantified science (I failed high school algebra three times). The fact that I have become tolerably competent in these fields is only because of the brain boost I’ve gotten from 35 years of formal meditation practice.

Q: *If you could sum it up, why should people attend your lecture?*

A: When I look at the really big picture, the grand landscape of all history from the stone age until today, two peaks of human achievement stand out as most impressive and relevant: the method of science for clearly explaining the natural world and the method of meditation for directly experiencing one’s spiritual source. If these two methodologies, each incredibly powerful in its own right were to cross-fertilize, they might give birth to a totally new paradigm, a paradigm with the power to deeply and perhaps quickly better the lives of much of humanity. The issues I intend to discuss may turn out to be central to the next phase of human history. If nothing else, just knowing that something like this *could* occur allows one to be joyous and energized even in times like these when the world situation seems so bleak.