



Buddhism beyond the bounds of belief

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Zen Buddhism and Modern Physics: Morality and Religion in the New Millennium

R J Brissenden

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The mathematician and philosopher Alfred North Whitehead once wrote: "When we consider what religion is for mankind, and what science is, it is no exaggeration to say that the future course of history depends upon the decision of this generation as to the relations between them."



I agree with Whitehead's assessment, but would add that in the main we have got the relations between science and religion badly wrong. We have either denied that there is any relationship between them at all (the neo-orthodox position advocated by the theologian Karl Barth and, in a modified form, by the evolutionary biologist Stephen Jay Gould), or we seek an easy alliance or even

a conflation in which science and religion blur and blend so that one mysteriously supports the other. What we need is a third way that can expose the core dimensions of science and religion, thereby leading to an appreciation of exactly where common ground can be found, and where the two rightly go their separate ways.

While I consider the investigation of the relation between science and the spiritual dimensions of life to be of great importance, I am afraid that this book by Reg Brissenden is a huge disappointment. Briefly put, it is a hodgepodge of ideas, speculations and strong opinions written in a cavalier and sometimes abrasive style. Granted, here and there interesting connections are made, but no sooner are they suggested than they become accepted as part of a grand synthesis that ranges from the Hilbert-space formalism of quantum mechanics and Penrose's so-called "no-access" theorem, to political history and a postulated Zen "Bose field". (This field is supposedly the mediating "particle" that couples with an as yet undiscovered physical structure in the brain to connect us with "actuality", or Penrose's world of Platonic ideas.)

In the interest of fairness, I will try to give a brief overview of a book that, considering the range of its topics, defies summarizing. Brissenden sees mathematics and physics, especially when taken together with Zen Buddhist philosophy, as having guided our deepest understanding of the world at all levels - both physical and spiritual. Within the first 75 pages we are given a whirlwind treatment of classical physics, artificial intelligence, Zen, free will, quantum physics, von Neumann's treatment of measurement, the "many worlds" interpretation of quantum mechanics, and sundry other subjects. Even in the first chapter Brissenden discovers what he takes to be a compelling correspondence between the theory of quantum-mechanical observation and the Zen concept of "discrimination". He also sees a link between quantum superposition and experiences in *satori*, the sudden enlightenment sought in Zen Buddhism. The author periodically picks up these supposed correspondences and suggests that they will lead to various novel discoveries in science.

The two heroes of the book are the mathematician Roger Penrose and the philosopher Michael Lockwood. According to Brissenden, Lockwood offers the correct interpretation of quantum mechanics, and one that is also in agreement with Zen Buddhist philosophy. Penrose, meanwhile, is seen as having proved that human beings possess an intuitive ability to go beyond a purely computational way of thinking and enter a realm of "actuality" that seems to lie beyond the everyday physical world, in the spiritual domain. Here is where Brissenden's idea of "Zen bosons" comes in. Relativity, cosmology and free will all appear

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We are then taken on another whirlwind tour through the history of Zen Buddhism and Brissenden's unique version of Zen ethics. By the way, he dismisses reincarnation as a sop to the ego-loving Hindus, which makes for a novel reading of Buddhist ethics. Brissenden closes with a long chapter on religion (or what he terms "sanctified unreason"), which is as much about Hegel, the politics of 20th-century warfare, Post-Modernism and the evidence for extrasensory perception, as it is about religion.

My objections to Brissenden's approach are many, but I will concentrate on only two. First, he takes on too much, and in doing so fails to make a solid case for any of his speculations. Zen Buddhism and Modern Physics is an unending series of one-page summaries of science, mathematics, Zen and world history. In the end, rather than being stimulated I was impatient for a careful, substantial treatment of what are important topics. Second, I distrust completely an approach that looks for correspondences between Zen Buddhism and quantum physics. This approach is common in some dialogues between science and religion, and I believe it to be fundamentally misguided and nearly always unproductive. We should not be comparing the fruits of theology with the fruits of science. Rather, science and religion should seek a more fundamental basis for their discussions - one that elucidates the philosophical and empirical foundations of each. You'd Buddha believe it - science and religion need to forge closer links.

About the author

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