

B. Alan Wallace

*A New Paradigm for Science and Religion*

Week Two: "The Buddha's Empiricism and Ethical Pragmatism Challenges  
Dogmatism in Religion"

September 11, 2021



Welcome to the second lecture in this four-part series, "A New Paradigm for Science and Religion in the 21st Century." I'm Alan Wallace, and I've devoted my life to seeking to lead a meaningful life that is rooted in truth, understanding of reality, and virtue. This lecture series is inspired by that same motivation to learn what is true and to learn how to lead a meaningful life.

In this second lecture, entitled "The Buddha's Empiricism and Ethical Pragmatism Challenges Dogmatism in Religion," I suggest that we may be premature in categorically characterizing the Buddha's teachings, Buddhism, as a religion because this is, after all, a Western construct. Superimposing this language outside of Western civilization is already a categorical error. Are the elements of Buddhism that are religious? Definitely. That should not overshadow the fact that there are elements of Buddhism that are radically empirical, rigorous, logical, and scientific in a way that is complementary to modern Eurocentric science.

The Buddha challenged dogmatism of all kinds—not only the dogmatism of religion but also the dogma of materialism, which was already being propagated in India 2,600 years ago. We find basis for this claim of the Buddha's own empiricism and ethical pragmatism in a very often quoted dharma talk that he gave to the Kalamas, a clan of people residing in the region of Kosala. They were a village full of skeptics, and the Buddha famously advised them, "Do not be led by reports or tradition or hearsay. Be not led by the authority of religious texts, nor by specious logic, nor by taking appearances at face value, nor by delight in speculative opinion, nor by seeming possibilities, nor by the idea, 'this is our teacher.' When you know for yourselves that certain things are unwholesome, wrong, bad, or morally reprehensible, then give them up. And when you know for yourselves that certain things are wholesome and good, then accept them and follow them."

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There are types of behavior, ways of speaking, ways of viewing reality, beliefs, and desires that are toxic and undermine our own and others' well-being, and there are other types that are conducive to our own and others' well-being. The Buddha is saying not to rely on external authority—even himself. Instead, know for yourself. The phrase "ehipassiko," or "come and see," was a slogan in early Buddhism. Don't come and believe or come and obey, but come and see for yourselves.

The very foundation of all of the Buddha's teachings boil down to what are called the four noble truths. These are radically empirical, radically pragmatic, and it's up to each of us to explore them for ourselves, to experientially identify the full range of suffering to which human beings and other sentient beings are vulnerable—not just the suffering that's obvious to us, but go deeper to our vulnerability of suffering.

How confident can we be and on what basis can we be assured that all of our suffering comes to an end at death? It's a happy thought: rest in peace; now, all your problems are over. Whatever terrible things you've done to the world, no consequences for you, and whatever problems you might have, all you have to do is stop breathing. What an easy way out. That's the third noble truth for the materialist: all you have to do is die, and all your problems cease. What is that based on except for hearsay, dogma of materialism, and so on?

Check with an open mind. Question your own assumptions. You can question the beliefs of Buddhism too. But the beliefs of Buddhism are not responsible for the suffering you are experiencing right now—it's your own beliefs, behaviors, thoughts, and mental afflictions. Once you've really got a good sense of the full spectrum of suffering, then identify the fundamental underlying causes of suffering with an emphasis on the origins of mental distress.

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Whenever we're feeling unhappy, upset, irritated, resentful, hateful, angry, or full of contempt, all of these emotions are very destructive. They're afflictive. They disrupt the balance of the mind. They distort our view of reality. And when we feel upset, by and large, we blame something else. Ask a neuroscientist, and he'll say, "Blame your brain. You're not responsible; the brain is doing everything." That's just a metaphysical belief. There's no evidence for that. In fact, that belief has been totally discredited by the fact that the mind influences the brain in mysterious ways. The placebo effect is just for starters.

What are the true underlying causes of suffering? Identify them for ourselves. This is the Buddha's message: don't simply rely upon authority. It's radically empirical. Identify the true inner causes of suffering. Don't blame everything on the environment, other people, politics, business, and so forth. They may or may not catalyze your mental distress. But you can be sitting in a room all by your own with no stimuli coming in at all, and you can be totally unhappy, depressed, anxious, and neurotic. We don't need any help to be unhappy. We can do it all by ourselves. Everything outside is secondary—important, but secondary.

When we have identified the actual underlying causes, which the Buddha identified as ignorance, craving, and hatred or hostility, then we ask, on what grounds do we assume that these causes are intrinsic to our minds and our identity? If the various mental afflictions of craving, hostility, and so forth are derivative of ignorance and delusion, which is the fundamental insight—not a hypothesis, but an insight—of the Buddha, then we can ask, how can we overcome ignorance and delusion? The answer is by knowing reality as it is. If that's enough, then the derivative or emergent mental afflictions would vanish.

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Is freedom from suffering a possibility? Is freedom from the causes of suffering a possibility? Come and see for yourself. But you won't know if you're just sitting on the sidelines and thinking about it a little bit.

Finally, when it seems at least a good working hypothesis that maybe we can be free, the question is how? Maybe we don't have to be neurotic. Freud assumed that we were made neurotic and there was nothing we could do about it. But maybe he was wrong. Maybe we don't have to be neurotic. We don't have to be anxious. We don't have to be subject to depression, misery, hatred, and all the other afflictions of the mind. How? What's the path? What's the way to such freedom?

The Buddha laid this out in the fourth noble truth: start with ethics. Start by leading a benevolent and nonviolent way of life. Cultivate and refine your mind. That's what meditation really means is to cultivate your mind. It's not some esoteric discipline for New Age people or mystical people. The Sanskrit term for meditation is "bhavana," which means to cultivate. If you're not cultivating your mind, then what are you a human being for? What's the point?

We have these brilliant minds with amazing intelligence. We can cultivate our minds, cultivate insight, and recognize the true causes of suffering. We know the method for overcoming them is understanding reality as it is starting from the inside out: our own identity, our own minds, in relationship to the world around us. What is this path? It's ethics; it's samadhi, the cultivation of exceptional states of mental health and balance; and finally, it's wisdom. This is a recurrent theme of the great religions and philosophies throughout history: it's the truth that makes you free. Come to know reality as it is.

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In terms of Buddhist worldview and science, the dominant knowledge paradigm for this 21st century, the Dalai Lama himself, the most prominent Buddhist monk on earth, has commented repeatedly that if the scientific community produces any compelling evidence that clearly refuted any belief in Buddhism whatsoever, he would drop the Buddhist belief. If there's compelling evidence to the contrary, he will drop Buddhist belief, including belief in reincarnation. That's the view of a scientist, not a religious believer that never questions his own beliefs. But the Dalai Lama hastens to add that the mere absence of evidence is not evidence for absence. The mere fact that scientists have not discovered something doesn't mean it doesn't exist. For this, we need to know, what are the limitations of modern science?

If we look right to what the Buddha was pointing to in his radically empirical and pragmatic way, he says there are three fundamental causes of suffering: ignorance, together with delusion; not knowing the the nature of reality and getting it wrong; and especially what we care most about, finding happiness and wishing to be free of suffering.

We're ignorant of these causes. Even modern science, especially neuroscience and psychological sciences, is so dominated by materialism that scientists hardly ever look elsewhere outside of the material domain, the social domain, or the environmental domain to see what are the causes of suffering. We know many, many catalysts for mundane pleasure, sensual pleasures, and so forth. But what about genuine well-being, a sustainable sense of well-being? What are the inner causes? We're largely in a dark age about the very nature of the mind and the true causes of mental distress and genuine well-being in this modern era.

This is a strength of Buddhism that has been empirically and experientially tested for 2,500 years. Buddhism is rich in a wide array of meditative practices that are theoretically rich, not designed to indoctrinate, but designed to arouse intelligent inquiry and to cause us to question

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assumptions we've been carrying for a very long time. There's craving, looking outwards for the actual causes of happiness, chasing after them, and never finding them. There's anger, looking outwards for the cause of unhappiness, getting angry, upset, irritated, and so forth without recognizing the inner causes.

Delusion, craving, hostility—if one investigates these carefully, as I have been for about 50 years by now, there's enormous explanatory power to explain the full range of human conflict and human-created misery as populations and as individuals. Meditatively, we can look inwards to see when the balance of the mind is disrupted, thrown into turbulence, warped, our perception of reality distorted. The cause of inner mental distress is mental afflictions. The antidote is not learning the right dogma, adopting the right belief system, or criticizing an alien belief system.

Life is short. How much time do we want to spend criticizing other people's belief systems? It's our own beliefs, assumptions, ways of life, and mental afflictions that underlie and perpetuate our own unhappiness and dissatisfaction. Depression is the most detrimental of all illnesses on the planet earth right now. Depression is the most debilitating economically, the most costly. And how do we treat it? With drugs, which merely suppress the symptoms and bring negative side effects. Therapeutic mental science to get to the root of suffering is found in tremendous abundance and depth in Buddhism. This is not religion. This is not philosophy. This is empiricism at its best: come and see for yourself.

Buddhism, like any other knowledge tradition, is vulnerable to falling into dogmatism, complacency, and closed-mindedness. Buddhists are no less vulnerable to accepting unquestioned assumptions than anybody else. But we can often miss the fact that Buddhism emerged from a culture radically different than ours, and Buddhism is not simply a religion or a philosophy or science. There are rigorous methods of inquiry that were developed by the Buddha

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himself and that have been perpetuated and developed over centuries since then to investigate, above all, the nature of the mind and the role of the mind in nature, discoveries that have never been made by modern science.

In modern psychological sciences, we have no rigorous means for observing the mind directly or observing states of consciousness. We're always looking outwards to brain correlates and behavioral expressions, and we're missing the most important way to investigate the mind, which is by looking right at it. That's where we will go in the next lecture: to discoveries that have been allegedly made and intersubjectively validated by centuries upon centuries of great masters of Buddhist contemplative practice.