

A Modern Paradigm

Buddhist methods are about developing the mind. But what is the mind? Where is it? How does it function? Buddhist thought might be considered the first systematic approach to describing the mind. Yet, as is true of many fields of inquiry, this does not mean that all of its classic ideas stand the test of time. Juniper's perspective is that the heart of meditation training is not dependent on outdated theories about the mind and the physical world. It is, instead, found by marrying our evolving knowledge about the mind and the physical world with the insight, philosophy, and training methods of an extraordinary tradition for cultivating human potential.

Science has radically transformed our understanding of the physical world, from the outer reaches of the universe to the innermost workings of the brain. Old notions of the earth having a central or special place in the universe have been replaced with a picture of a universe unimaginably vaster than anything conceived before, an unfolding of countless tiny, interdependent increments. Similarly, we are discovering that almost every facet of human cognition and emotion has underpinnings in a staggeringly complex system of electrical and chemical signals moving through extensive neural networks within the brain and body.

This onslaught of knowledge brings great challenges to our belief systems, exposing large gaps between ancient views and modern knowledge. Christian theology, for example, has been divided over how to reconcile biblical and scientific explanations of creation. Buddhist thought faces similar challenges as old notions of karma and reincarnation come up against modern ideas. Nonetheless, Buddhist thought is extremely well suited to the task of integrating modern knowledge and inner development. Built on a foundation of continuous inquiry and development, the central philosophy of Buddhist thought does not require us to accept ancient beliefs, even Buddhist ones, when they are contradicted by modern findings.

The Buddha is famously said to have cautioned against the dangers of accepting ideas on the basis of authority alone. He is known for advocating the importance of testing doctrine as though testing a nugget of gold to see if it is real.¹ In one instance, he is said to have taught that one ought not believe something just because it is said by others, is a tradition, is well known, is cited in a text, is seemingly based on reasoning, or is recited by a respected teacher.² One should rely, instead, on personal validation through a process of experience and inquiry. This is not to say that the words of respected authorities should be ignored; rather, it means they should not be accepted blindly, but only after due consideration and inquiry.

Several hundred years after the time of the Buddha, the works attributed to Nagarjuna, said to be “undoubtedly the most important, influential, and widely studied Mahayana Buddhist philosopher,”³ make an entire philosophy out of critical thinking. The most famous of these, the *Mulamadhyamakakarika* (“*The Fundamental Verses of the Middle Way*”), is the seminal presentation of what is known as the dialectic, an analytical philosophy based on inquiry and critical thought.⁴ A few hundred years later, another revered Buddhist philosopher, Chandrakirti, elucidated and perpetuated the dialectic method in what became one of Buddhist philosophy’s most famous texts.⁵ And the great Indian Buddhist university of Nalanda (c. 400–1200) was a bastion of progressive thinking, inquiry, and learning, a forerunner of the modern university.

Even the present Dalai Lama has repeatedly confirmed the importance of reasoned thinking, and he has personally made great efforts to understand what modern science has to say about the mind and the universe.⁶ In *Path to Bliss: A Practical Guide to Stages of Meditation*, he wrote, “After all, the basic approach of the Buddhist is to subject concepts to rigorous logical processes, and if anything contradicts direct observation and logic, it should not be accepted just because it is taught in the sutras or the texts.”⁷

In short, as we examine the heart of Buddhist ideas, what we find is not a rigid system of principles that must be adopted no matter the place and time, but an open, dynamic methodology for gaining inner well-being and maximizing the potential of experience. It appears clear, therefore, that examining older Buddhist views of the physical world in light of modern knowledge is not just

consistent with the central philosophy of Buddhist thought but also is mandated by it.

Buddhist thought has not been immune from rigidity and inflexibility, however. Its central precepts call for a process of continuous inquiry, but this inquiry has not always occurred. One may ask, why not? If inquiry is so central to Buddhist thought, why has it not already been extended to encompass modern knowledge? The answer is that it may not have been necessary until now. Buddhist methods must be effective in the culture and time in which they are applied. If the conflict between new discovery and ancient ideas is not deeply felt, there is no reason to address it. The conflict exists now because the divide between modern knowledge and classic Buddhist theories has occurred only in the past fifty years or so. If this is the first time we have encountered such a gap, this is first time we must cross it. Embarking on this crossing is the central task of Juniper's work.

Although we will find that some Buddhist theories about the physical world are outdated, we also will see that others are remarkably in tune with modern ideas. For example, one of the central insights of the early Buddhist philosophers—that reality is a vastly interconnected, interdependent arising—is uncannily in accord with the modern scientific view.

To most benefit contemporary meditators, therefore, our task is to extract from classic Buddhist thought the essential methods and ideas that remain vital, and to place them in a modern framework and context. By so doing, we will create a new paradigm for a deep path of meditation, a paradigm through which our humanity can continue to grow and evolve in an ever-changing world.

NOTES

¹ “As the wise test the purity of gold by burning, cutting and examining it by means of a piece of touchstone, so should you accept my words after examining them and not merely out of regard and reverence for me.” Jnanasara-samuccaya, as cited in Piyadiassi Thera, *The Seven Factors of Enlightenment*, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/piyadassi/wheel001.html>. See also *The Kalama Sutta*, <http://oaks.nvg.org/kalama.html#ref> and *The Dharma*, <http://buddhism.kalachakranet.org/dharma.html>

² Ven. Soma Thera, *Kalama Sutta: The Buddha’s Charter of Free Inquiry*, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/soma/wheel008.html>. See also *The Kalama Sutta*, <http://oaks.nvg.org/kalama.html>

³ Jay L. Garfield, *Empty Words: Buddhist Philosophy and Cross-Cultural Interpretation*. Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 2.

⁴ Jay L. Garfield (trans.), *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way: Nagarjuna’s Mulamadhyamakakarika*. Oxford University Press, 1995.

⁵ See Jamgön Mipham, *Introduction to the Middle Way, Chandrakirti’s Madhyamakavatara with Commentary by Jamgön Mipham*. Shambhala Publications, 2002.

⁶ See, for example, His Holiness the Dalai Lama, *The Universe in a Single Atom: The Convergence of Science and Spirituality*. (Broadway Publications, 2006)

⁷ His Holiness the Dalai Lama, *Path to Bliss: A Practical Guide to Stages of Meditation*. Snow Lion Publications, 1991, p. 63.