

BUDDHISM AND FRANCIS BACON

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This essay contrasts the inner-world vision of Gautama Buddha and Francis Bacon's far-reaching definitions of the scientific method. Each in their own way overturned subservient adherence to acceptance of traditional authority through their formulation of original methods of exploration of the human condition. They spurned the conventional thought of the Brahmins and Scholastics respectively, and spearheaded movements that even today hundreds of years after their lifetimes continue to inspire creative thought and action. We will examine their innovations, commonalities of insights and methods, along with their place in contemporary thought.

Buddhism

Twenty-five hundred years ago, Gautama Buddha sought the answer to his naturally arising question – What is the meaning of suffering in the world? Eventually he became enlightened after six years of investigation. Reflecting on his new understanding, he concluded that others would benefit from his experience. He engaged upon a lifelong teaching career centered on the Four Noble Truths: suffering arises, suffering has a cause, the possibility of the cessation of suffering, and the path to its cessation. The feature that set Buddhism apart in Buddha's time is the same one that does today: the non-reification of self. This is the teaching that the self of all beings, including humans, has no abiding self-nature. All beings arise and live their lives within ever changing impermanent causes and conditions. No matter how much one searches, no enduring self can be found. There is a sense of self that holds the narrative of one's life, but upon close inspection even that self is not a permanent entity. The study of the Buddha's teaching liberates the practitioner from the manacles of the illusory concept of self, and delivers the vision of non-duality of the universe, wherein supposed dualities such as the mind-body, sacred-mundane, personal-universal, subject-object, and psychological-spiritual, are experienced as complements rather than diametrically positioned opposites. In this way alienation from the world is overcome and cessation of suffering is achieved.

Buddha did not teach his followers to accept his message only on his say so. He insisted that everyone verify the Four Noble Truths for themselves. The path of the Buddha is experiential, practical, and non-authoritative. To facilitate the education of those who came to him for instruction, the Buddha founded a monastic order with many disciplinary rules. Submission to outer authority assisted the monks in their study of the meditative life. However, inner authority always rested with the individual

monk, providing spiritual autonomy as a high value at the beginning of Buddhist practice. It can be said that Buddha's vision is a study of the interior world that uses scriptures, introspection, worldly activity, and above all meditation, to uncover the true nature of self and resolve the obstacles to a life of liberation.

Francis Bacon

Francis Bacon lived from 1561-1626, a period of intellectual fervor in England. He was educated at Cambridge, served as a barrister, a Member of Parliament, and ultimately became the Lord Chancellor. Even though he was high born in English society, his present day fame is derived from his liberating vision of what science should be. He redefined the practice and research of the scientific method. His book, the *Novum Organon* (the new instrument) laid out four points that endeavored to replace the logic based on the teachings of Aristotle. This was an audacious suggestion as Aristotle was firmly entrenched in the universities and Church dogma as the established authority on nature. Bacon was told by his educators to put aside inquiry and to accept without question Aristotle's method of study and to embrace his time-honored knowledge. Bravely breaking with convention, Bacon offered the *Novum Organon* that contained his scientific method and philosophical principles as the foundation for investigating the physical world without the impediment of pre-existing man-made conclusions. Bacon's *Novum Organon* rejected given "truths" as the primary and authoritative source of knowledge, while expounding a forward-looking method for acquiring new knowledge useful for enhancing the well-being of the world. He desired to promote the understanding of phenomena in order to minimize uncontrollable and unnecessary suffering.

Bacon's four points are:

1. Science is a dynamic, cooperative, and collaborative means of acquiring knowledge. Its conclusions are always tentative and open to modification as new information becomes available. Varying insights cause communities of interest to form around issues such as biology chemistry, physics, and sociology.
2. Science should be studied apart from theology and theology from science. There should be no science in theology, and no theology in science. The study of the world should be empirical, based on data, and non-metaphysical.
3. Methods of investigation and the acquisition of knowledge should be accomplished inductively. Starting with particulars of observable facts and then moving to general

descriptions. Experiments are then devised to test insights. All knowledge is subject to expanded research – nothing is final.

4. Knowledge of the world is power, enhancing the human condition through technological innovation, as well as accommodating the growth and application of charitable ventures and social institutions.

Commonalities of Buddhism and Bacon's Science

Even though Buddhism and the Baconian scientific method are commonly held to be opposites – one qualitative and subjective, the other quantitative and objective – upon closer examination these distinctions flounder as many similarities become apparent. The following is a non-exhaustive list of key points of correspondence.

1. Buddha and Bacon both dealt with questions that have verifiable answers – neither favored unsubstantiated beliefs. Bacon separated theology and science giving each their legitimate sphere of influence, insisting on empirical understanding. Buddha also adhered to the non-metaphysical, famously remaining silent to unanswerable questions such as, “What is death?” and “Is there a God?”
2. Information and insights are shared explicitly. Buddhism and science developed many schools and branches of emphasis, remaining open to transmitting of insights and knowledge gained in one area of expertise to another.
3. Both are experiential: Bacon insists on observation and experiment to verify the truth of a hypothesis. Buddha's teaching rests on the primacy of a thoroughgoing resolution of the fundamental misperception of a separate existence through meditation practice.
4. Both are practical and seek to relieve universally the suffering of the world.
5. Bacon replaced slavish adherence to deductive reasoning based on axiomatic traditional authority with inductive thinking. Induction moves from particulars about the external world to generalities that can be tested by experiment. Buddha starts with internal particulars and generates an understanding of the interconnectedness of the universe.
6. Both teach that all information is tentative: Old insights are replaced with new ones when they become available.
7. Both insist that every human being governs their relationship to society and nature in their own self-interest. Bacon does this by removing the fetters of scholasticism and clerical domination;

Buddha by his teaching that you must know for yourself – authentic spiritual authority arises within an individual, not imposed from an outside authority.

Buddhism and Bacon in the 21st Century

In the 19th century Bacon's dream of a science that enhances the life of humankind took a giant step forward. Science joined with the knowhow of technology, unleashing innumerable advances in the means to apply science to practical concerns, generating the many benefits and lifestyle improvements we enjoy today. Bacon lived into the 17th century, but the big push in technology started in the 18th century with the industrial revolution in England. It was two hundred years after Bacon's death that a seminal event occurred that instigated a great leap forward in the application of Bacon's desire for science to enrich the human condition. Joseph Fourier, a leading scientist of his day, published a paper on how heat behaved, ignoring the ontological question of what is the essential reality of heat. Up until then, scientists had tried to set up experiments that would reveal the fundamental nature of heat. Fourier's mathematical equations moved the emphasis of scientific research from the ontology (reality) of heat to controlling it in practical applications. It was as if he had said, forget about the essence of heat, leave that question to the philosophers, and focus on the mathematics of control. The nineteenth century continued in this manner, dramatically changing scientific exploration done for its own sake, to the marriage of technology and science. Universities up until that time were primarily transmitters of classical knowledge; professors were passive participants, teaching only what they learned, not adding significantly to the sum of human knowledge. However, by mid-century, universities began to respond to the society's desire for new methods and processes. Research to discover and implement new knowledge became a major portion of the university curricula, displacing the transmission of the classics as their chief objective.

The most powerful effects of the Baconian scientific method's rigorous questioning of past knowledge transpired in the realm of physics. Scientific thought based on strictly materialistic concepts began to crumble under the work of Planck, Einstein, and the founders of Quantum Theory. Newton and others had proposed an atomistic theory that the physical world consists of small bits of matter that interact and form the basis of all phenomena, and that consciousness and its subsequent conscious thoughts and feelings are determined, mechanistic outcomes of these microscopic events. Exploration of the microscopic world that produced Quantum Theory led to the complete breakdown of the explanation of consciousness provided by classical physics. The conscious

observer, excluded in classical understanding, is now recognized as an integral part of any experiment, and by inference, any action in the world. Most physicists, long accustomed to the objective viewpoint, have been less than eager to acknowledge that consciousness must be considered an essential element in the analysis of the physical world. Even in the face of repeated experiments that confirm that consciousness as integral, they continue to hold to “shut up and calculate,” preferring to engage with the practical only, ignoring the deep philosophical implications of their own discoveries. Nonetheless, I think Bacon would be very pleased at the globalization of human well being that has been established by charities, foundations, and worldwide organizations such as the United Nations.

As things stand now, the path of Bacon’s scientific method and the age-old intuitions of Buddhism appear as complementary requisites for an entirely new concept of the human self. The worlds of objective matter and subjective consciousness that science has established as an inseparable unity is a teaching that Buddhism has recognized since its inception twenty-five hundred years ago. The ancient Buddhist analysis of the conscious self understands that everything is interconnected and that nothing has an independent existence. This matches closely the philosophical shift of twenty-first century science that replaces the atoms of Newton with intricate and universal relationships. Together the scientific understanding of the unity of the mind-body continuum and the Buddhist understanding of interdependence offers an opportunity for the formulation of one consistent view of reality that includes both the advances of scientific endeavor and consciousness. Ethical standards centered on the paired reality of the mind-body continuum opens the door for an ethical theory that develops from experiential truth and not invented fiction. The dynamics of science and mathematics supplies a rational foundation of the external world, verifiable with repeatable experiments. Buddhism provides the inner vision through its tried and true method of exploring the internal world through wisdom, meditation, and ethics. The felt sense of the truth of the mind-body continuum by direct experience has the power to undermine the unjustifiable adherence to the remnants of the mechanical concept of the universe.

Taken in concert, Buddhism and Bacon’s science can provide a rational base for rooting ethics in experience not beliefs. Blind submission to unsubstantiated views closes off the greatest of human creative accomplishments: inquiry. History attests to the hostility that erupts when inquiry is put aside and rigid assumptions take the place of openness. Western culture has an opportunity to recognize the

ecumenical spirit of science and Buddhist thought, and create an inclusive society with a coherent Buddhist-Bacon precept at its heart. Let's hope this happens.

Bacon's Four Points	Where Buddhism Comes Close to Bacon
1. Science is:	Buddhism is:
Dynamic, Cooperative, Collaborative	Based on taking refuge in the Buddha (awakened mind), Dharma (Buddhist teachings), and Sangha (community of seekers)
Always correcting itself, its conclusions are always tentative	Impermanence is recognized, life is fluid and new, nothing is ever the final answer.
Acquisition of knowledge, pursuit of knowledge, use of knowledge	Acquisition of wisdom and compassion in the service of all beings
Varying insights cause communities of interest to form: biology, chemistry, physics, and sociology	Many valid approaches to enlightenment providing path for differing individuals
2. Method of acquisition of knowledge is inductive reasoning	Method of acquisition of wisdom is the Eightfold Path
Moves from particulars to generalities of experience	Moves from the particulars of right view to the generalities of right speech, action, and livelihood.
Then test with experiments, insights are open to expanded investigation, nothing is final	The practice of Samadhi (Meditation) awakens wisdom and compassion
3. Separation of science and theology	Experiential and practical
Science studies data of the world, empirical, and non-metaphysical, free from existential issues	Metaphysics is put aside. Inquiry is limited to answerable questions.
No theology in science, and no science in theology	Introspection, language, reason, and analysis are studied and given their correct place within human life
No a priori beliefs, wisdom only, does not posit untrue beliefs	Buddhism observes the world "as it is" without additions or subtractions.
4. Knowledge is power	Wisdom is shared human benefit
Enhances human place in the world and is to be cultivated as a means for human charity	Wisdom is heart-to-heart communication with all beings
Not mere philosophical contemplation	Wisdom is the post-conceptual experiential understanding of the nature of the self and its relationship with the world.