the scientific buddha: his short and happy life notes

blue text: subject for discussion

I regard this book as an account of the author's opinions on the subject. I do not believe his case is logically air tight.

"The Scientific Buddha is a pale reflection of the Sakyamuni Buddha."

That's right, so why worry about the "Scientific Buddha" superceeding Sakyamuni? It's not gonna happen.

The Scientific Buddha: His Short and Happy Life by Donald S. Lopez Jr.

From the book jacket:

"This book tells the story of the Scientific Buddha, "born" in Europe in the 1800s but commonly confused with the Buddha born in India 2,500 ears ago. The Scientific Buddha was sent into battle against Christian missionaries, who were proclaiming across Asia that Buddhism was a form of superstition. He proved the missionaries wrong, teaching a dharma that was in harmony with modern science. And his influence continues. Today his teaching of "mindfulness" is heralded as the cure for all manner of maladies, from depression to high blood pressure.

"In this potent critique, a well known chronicler of the West's encounter with Buddhism demonstrates how the Scientific Buddha's teachings deviate in crucial ways from those of the far older Buddha of ancient India. Donald Lopez shows that the western focus on the Scientific Buddha threatens to bleach Buddhism of its vibrancy, complexity, and power, even as the superficial focus on "mindfulness turns Buddhism into merely the latest self help movement."

The Scientific Buddha has served his purpose , the author argues. It is now time for him to pass into nirvana.

Chapter 1 A Purified Religion

The Terry Lectureship on Religion in the Light of Science and Philosophy, established at Yale by Dwight Terry in 1905, was part of an important trend in Europe and the US.

Buddhism is a religion that has been described as both a philosophy and a science.

The Buddha described a universe that was not created by God but that functioned according to the laws of causation. This law of causation extends to the moral realm

where virtue leads eventually to happiness and sin leads to suffering through the natural laws of karma.

The Buddha understood the operations of the mind, explaining how desire, hatred, and all manner of ignorance lead to all manner of physical and mental pain.

He described multiple universes, each with it's own sun, that arose out of nothingness and returned to nothingness.

The Buddha arrived at these truths not thru revelation but through investigation and analysis, testing hypotheses in the laboratory of his mind.

In 1896, Terry's contemporary, Paul Carus, founder of the Open Court Press, advocated what he called the Religion of Science, and described the Buddha as the first "positivist" and the first prophet of the "Religion of Science".

p.7.

"If there is any religion that would cope with modern scientific needs, it would be Buddhism."

This statement has been attributed to Einstein, but it appears nowhere is his writings or records of his conversations.

p. 8.

Everything said here has been said many times in the past, but these things are only limited and limiting perspectives on a vast and ancient tradition.

p. 9

Claims about the compatibility of Buddhism and science began in the 1860s.

Christianity was proclaimed superior to Buddhism by Christian missionaries because it possesses the scientific knowledge to accurately describe the world.

The effort of Buddhist elites to argue that Buddhism is truly a scientific religion was precipitated by these Christian missionary claims.

In a sense, the Buddhists wrested the weapon of science from the hands of the Christians and turned I against them.

p. 11.

Some are now reluctant to see links between Buddhism and science as anachronisms, and wonder if there are ways in which Buddhism and science might be compatible.

To ask that question raises a troubling thought: If Buddhism was compatible with science of the 19th century, how can it also be compatible with the science of the 21st century?

If the Buddha long ago understood Newtonian physics, did he also understand quantum mechanics?

Furthermore, …the content of the Buddha's enlightenment cannot change.

Yet the claims for compatibility have remained remarkably similar, both in content and rhetorical form. This similarity has persisted despite major shifts in what is meant by Buddhism [But this objection flies in the face of the author's original objection, which was that Looking at it as "science" was too limited and limiting for the vastness of Buddhism; thst Buddhism defies any definition]

and what is meant by science.

p.13

The referent of "science" is also fluid, sometimes nebulous [And thus perhaps may seem compatible with the vast nebulousness of Buddhism?]

Why do we yearn for the teachings of an itinerant mendicant in Iron age India, even of such profound insight , to somehow anticipate the formulae of Einstein? I hope to be able to address this and other questions in the chapters of this book.

Buddhist scholars tend to not mention Buddhism in the singular, but to refer to Buddhisms.

No scholar of Buddhism would dare attempt to identify some essence or even defining characteristic of Buddhism.

p. 15

For the Buddha to be identified as an ancient sage fully attuned to the findings of modern science, he had to under go a transformation from the Buddha who had been revered by Buddhists across Asia for many centuries, identified only as one among many idols, and with many different names. European scholars set out on a quest to find the historical Buddha, just as there was a quest to find the historical Jesus. This new Buddha was portrayed as a prince who had renounced his throne, who proclaimed the truth to all who would listen, who prescribed a life dedicated to morality, without the need for God. This Buddha would become the Scientific Buddha.

In the third chapter, the author will focus on the theory of evolution and it's compatibility with the fundamental law of Buddhism, the law of karma. Early on, parallels have been proclaimed between the two so often that karma came to de described by many as a natural law. Only recently have Buddhist thinkers argued that Darwin's theory has profound negative implications that strike at the foundation of Buddhist doctrine.

p. 16-17.

In the last chapter, the author will ask: if there can be a fruitful conversation between Buddhism and science, how would it proceed?

Meditation has become the centerpiece of the Buddhism and science discourse. The author will ask how current research on meditation have to do with the meaning of meditation as traditionally understood and practiced by Buddhists. If Buddhist forms of meditation are shown to reduce what we today call "stress". what does that mean. Is there a danger of turning Buddhism into a form of self help, or has Buddhism always, in its own way, been a self help movement?

In the final chapter, the author will use the findings of split brain research to consider one of the most fundamental problems is Buddhist thought, the problem of the relationship between doctrine and experience.

p. 19

Chapter 2 The Birth of the Scientific Buddha

Chapter 3 The Problem with Karma

The doctrine of karma and the attendant doctrine of rebirth were seen, and continue to be seen by some Buddhist scholars, as somehow analogous to the theory of evolution. Much of the credit for this perception should go to the Theosophists. Madame Blavatsky proposed her theory of rebirth in works like *The Secret Doctrine*, whereby entities called "monads" evolve over millions of years through increasingly subtle forms. Blavatsky and her followers claimed this system was anticipated in the ancient mystery religions, including Buddhism. Several books published between 2007 and 2009 also suggest a connection between Darwin's evolution and Buddhism.

In Buddhist thought, when a consciousness enters the womb of the mother as a new being, it caries with it all the seeds of all the actions done by that being. As Buddha said, "beings are heirs of their actions (karma). One's intention in action is very important.

At the time of death, a single complete action, performed in this or a previous life comes to the fore and serves as the primary cause of the entire next lifetime; not a weighing of virtues versus vises.

Karma explains everything. The physical environment, feelings of pleasure or pain, both physical and mental, are the product of past karma.

A Pali text, perhaps translated as the Explanation of the Cosmic Order sets forth 5 constituents of the natural order. The first is the manifest order; that each universe follows the same sequence of creation, abiding, destruction, and vacuity. The second, the seed order or seed law; the natural order as pertains to plants. The third, the law of karma; that virtuous deeds naturally result in the feeling of pleasure and negative deeds naturally result in the feeling of pain in the future. The fourth is that if consciousness, The fifth, the dharma, an untranslatable term that means something like the order of things; the general law of cause and effect in both physical and moral terms, and the law of impermanence.

This list of 5 elements represents what might be termed traditional Buddhist science; it is a natural philosophy in which the natural order extends into the moral realm; all things operate with a predictable regularity.

he Buddha described not only the world; the cycle of birth and death, but also an escape from the world. The purpose of the Buddhist path is to put an end to the rebirth and inevitable sufferings that attend to it. Karma is the key. Without desire and hatred, there can be no karma; and without karma there can be no rebirth. For someone who has worked out their karma, rebirth does not occur. This is called nirvana. This is summarized in the doctrine of the four noble truths: 1) Life is suffering; 2) the cause of suffering is karma (desire or ignorance). He denied the existence of an eternal God. 3) The cessation of suffering is the cessation of desire. 4) The path to that cessation (8 fold way, etc).

In 2009, an article in the London Times explained that while preparing his new edition of Darwin's *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872) the eminent psychologist Paul Ekman found parallels with Buddhism, especially on the topic of compassion.
p.50.

However, Darwin does not use the word "compassion" in this book, but rather "sympathy", and then only briefly.
p. 64

It would seem that the doctrines of karma and rebirth correlate poorly with the theory of natural selection, in which random mutations of matter occur in such a way as to insure the survival of the species. In his book The Universe in a Single Atom, the Dalai Lama writes "From the Buddhist perspective, the idea of these mutations being random is deeply unsatisfying for a theory that purports to explain the origin of life."
p. 68-69.

Far from teaching a dharma compatible with Darwin's theory of natural selection, it is perhaps more accurate to regard the Buddha as a counter revolutionary, actively seeking the extinction of the human race.

p. 80.

Interlude: A Primer on Buddhist Meditation

The term "mindfulness" figures prominently in a famous discourse attributed to the Buddha, entitled the *Satipatthana Suttra*; the *Discourse on the Foundations of Mindfulness.* Here the Buddha sets forth what he calls "the only path" or "the one way." Four objects of mindfulness are prescribed: Mindfulness of the body, of feelings (which refers to physical and mental experiences of pleasure, pain, and neutrality), of the mind (in which one observes the mind when influenced by different positive and negative emotions), and of dharmas (the contemplation of the constituents of the mind and body and the four noble truths.) The practice of mindfulness of the body is intended to result in the recognition of the meditator of the impermanence, suffering, and no-self of the body.

Over the long history of Buddhism across Asia, lay people rarely practiced meditation. This began to change, at least in Burma, when it came under the control of the British in 1885. Believing that the presence of the British was a harbinger of a degenerate age, a monk sought to ensure preservation of the Buddhist teaching by spreading it as widely as possible. He began to teach meditation to lay people. Another monk chose to advocate the Buddha's *Discourse on the Foundations of Mindfulness,* and included lay people in his teaching. The practice of meditation, based on the *Discourse* would become something of a national craze in Burma.

rom Burma, mindfulness meditation spread to adjacent countries and then to India, where seekers from Europe and the US enrolled in meditation retreats. From India it came to the US. The "mindfulness" that is now taught in hospitals and studied in neurology labs is thus a direct result of the British overthrow of the Burmese king.
P. 81-99

Chapter 4: The Death of the Scientific Buddha

In 1873, a great debate took place between Christianity and Buddhism in the town of Panadure in Sri Lanka. Each of the parties in the debate claimed his religion was compatible with science, although what the meant by science seemed to differ.
For the Buddhist, science seemed to mean astrology, while for the Christian, science meant modern astronomy, geography, and technology.

Over the course of history, what was once science has become pseudoscience, and some of those pseudosciences have been linked to Buddhism.

What has been meant by Buddhism has also changed over the decades. Originally, Buddhism meant the practice identified with the Theraveda tradition. In the period after the second world war, Buddhism became Zen. In the 1970s, Buddhism often meant the

philosophy of Nagarjuna and the doctrine of emptiness. Since the 70s, Buddhism in dialog with science has largely been Tibetan, a form previously regarded as degenerate. Now the Grand Lama of Lhasa holds annual seminars with some of the leading scientists of the world.

The greatest energy today in science is directed toward neuroscience, and especially research in mediation. Rather than pointing to affinities between particular Buddhist doctrines and particular scientific theories, research on meditation has sought to determine the physiological and neurological effects of Buddhist meditation, which would seem to introduce a welcome empirical element to the Buddhism and science discourse. But what is “Buddhist” about the meditation?

One of the forms of meditation examined in a federal study is Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction. But is stress reduction a traditional goal of meditation?

A look at various forms of meditation suggests stress reduction is often not the aim.

The goal of the central topic of meditation is to cause one to regard this life as a prison, to be escaped from. The goal of this meditation seems to be stress INDUCTION, not reduction.

Some Buddhist thinkers have claimed that the teachings of the Buddha are so profound that they will always remain beyond anything that science can understand.

Yet for most, the fact that scientific research has not yet offered significant insights into Buddhist thought does not mean it cannot.

The author would like to consider some possible areas for exploration.

The history of Buddhism and science is filled with false resonance: the doctrine of karma sounds like the theory of evolution, the Buddhist account of the origin of the Cosmos sounds like the Big Bang, and the doctrine of emptiness sounds like quantum physics.

Use of comparison to organize experience may be an evolutionary adaption, but something else also seems to be at work here.

Buddha taught a path he had followed and it worked. Science on the other hand, is a quest for what has never been known by anyone, and yet is somehow there, waiting to be discovered. in the meantime, we must live in doubt. Maybe this is why we yearn for the teachings of Buddha to anticipate Einstein.

There are so many questions to be asked and answered, questions not simply that the ancient meditation practices of Buddhism might answer for modern neurology, but questions about Buddhist meditation that might be answered by neurobiology.

Possible relationship between meditation and doctrine.

It is believed that all of the Buddha's doctrines, written by others, are in some sense the enunciation of his silent experience as he sat cross legged beneath a tree in meditation. Scholars have also sought to determine precisely what the Buddha taught.

The quest for his true words is complicated by the fact that nothing seems to have been recorded until long after the Buddha's passing, and then not in India but in Sri Lanka.

The extant versions of what are accepted by the Buddhist tradition as the speech of Buddha derive from Sri Lanka editions eight centuries after the Buddha's death.

The lack of certainty on what the Buddha said has led to a focus on experience.

There has been debate on the priority of mystical experience and doctrine; on whether Doctrine is the articulation of mystical experience or the experience is induced and defined by doctrine. William James gave priority to experience. [I do not see how it could be otherwise. Doctrine is the fossilized remains of experience, to paraphrase James.]

In the discourse of Buddhism and science, there has been almost universal support for priority of experience. The Buddha's mind is portrayed as a laboratory where hypothesis are tested, finally arriving at the truth.

What are the mechanisms that allow the conscious mind to illuminate the unconscious? In the case of meditation, how does silent experience become verbalized?

What confidence do we have that the narrative (and resulting doctrine) deriving from the experience accurately reflects that experience?

In the course of neurological research, one would expect that the deepest states of the Buddhist experience will eventually be identified as the firing of neurons in a specific area in the brain. What is the relationship of this experience to that found in the Buddhost canon?

The massive edifice of Buddhist doctrine would seem in some sense an inadequate and perhaps irrelevant attempt to articulate the ineffable.

To entertain this question, one would need to determine whether meditation is a right brain (intuitive) or left brain (rational) activity. A survey of the standard meditation manuals would suggest it is both.

It is said that the Buddha has no thought, only direct perception without the medium of mental images. [Might be perceiving David Bohm's implicate order.] so it seems that it is associated with the right brain.

Like the Buddha's original teaching, the neurology of the Buddha's enlightenment is irretrievable. [I don't think this has been demonstrated.]

But Buddhist monks and nuns have meditated for millennia, and they have done so based on discursive instructions.

If there is to be a dialog between Buddhism and science, it will be the translation of doctrine into meditative states and meditative states into data.

[I do not see that this follows based on the material presented in the book.]
What can we say about the Scientific Buddha? He was born in nineteenth century Paris. From there he traveled to Sri Lanka and then other parts of Asia. He is alive and well today in the imaginations of many around the world, and yet from a Buddhist perspective he is out of place.

Time in Buddhism is not cyclic, as is often claimed. Regardless of the numerous incarnations of Buddha, all memory of a former Buddha must be lost before a new Buddha appears. there is forward movement.

This cosmic order is disrupted by the Scientific Buddha. He appeared in the world before the teaching of the Sakyamuni Buddha had been forgotten.

[The author is arguing from two sides. First he argues that the Scientific Buddha has ursurped the identity of the real Buddha. Now he is saying the Scientific Buddha has disrupted the cosmic order by appearing too soon.]

The Scientific Buddha has taught us the meditation of mindfulness; ie stress reduction.

Some scholars have begun to refer to a form of "modern Buddhism", originating somewhere in the mid 19th century. This "modern Buddhism" has it's own defining doctrines, one of which is the compatibility of Buddhism and science.

but what becomes of the old Sakyamuni Buddha when a new Buddha appears on the scene?

The Scientific Buddha is a pale reflection of the Sakyamuni Buddha.

[That's right, so why worry about the "Scientific Buddha" superceeding Sakyamuni? It's not gonna happen.]

It should not be seen in Buddhist terms as the two truths, with science concerned with conventional truth and Buddhosm concerned with the ultimate truth.

[So who is seeing it that way? It's a naïve perception.]

If an ancient religion like Buddhism has anything to offer science, it is not the facile confirmation of its findings.

[Some would argue that science has confirmed the findings of the Sakyamuni Buddha.]

“If the past has a future, it is in its description of an alternative world, one that calls into question so many of the fundamental assumptions of our scientific world”

[Yes, exactly. just like QM questions our objective existence and requires a complete rethinking of our scientific world view.]

That is, the Buddha says that the bodhisattva is someone who vows to liberate all beings in the universe from suffering, while understanding that ultimately there are no beings in the universe to be liberated from suffering because those beings do not ultimately exist…. It claims there can be compassion without [“]essentialism[“] (some real essence.).

[Yes, compassion is real in the same way that suffering is real; both are non-material. The essence of science is not limited to the material.]

It is here perhaps, in the domain of wisdom and compassion… that the incompatibility of Buddhism and science becomes most clear.

[Again I see no incompatibility. A scientist using the scientific method is quite capable of compassion without “essentialism”.]