**It Needs Saying**

**Buddhism is not a philosophy, science, psychotherapy, or culture. It is a religion.**

By Dharmavidya David Brazier. TRICYCLE MAGAZINE May 30, 2015

It should not need saying. After all, it’s obvious. Nonetheless it does need saying. It needs saying because it has been denied by so many people including many who are eminent and even some whose own roles, behavior, and faith contradict what they are saying. It needs saying clearly, that Buddhism is a religion.

Further, this is the right time to say it. The bandwagon of secularization of Buddhism has gradually gathered momentum to the point where it now threatens the whole basis of what the Buddha bequeathed us. Buddhism is becoming popular, but it is doing so in a form that is a new creation. This new creation is not the traditional Buddhism of Asia and it is not the Buddhism of Shakyamuni Buddha, the founder, either. This new creation is an artifact of modernity and postmodernity using elements abstracted from Buddhism, tailored to gain popularity by satisfying contemporary prejudice.

Having said that, we must add that there is nothing wrong with adaptation and creativity. Many of the new manifestations and applications of ideas and methods derived from Buddhism are intrinsically valuable and can stand on their own feet. Buddhism is like a copious spring, the water from which can be gathered and poured into many different shaped containers. What is problematic, however, is that the reductionist philosophy by which such artifacts are being generated threatens to poison the spring from which the water is flowing. It is a kind of asset stripping, or, we could say, it is like taking the fruit while killing the root.

The basic reductionist principle that informs this process is itself the opposite of dharma. It is precisely the kind of blindness that dharma teaching exists to awaken us from. This is why a warning bell needs to be sounded.

I have played a role in the propagation and popularization of Buddhist psychology so I have a personal part in this process. As somebody who could be seen to be one of the culprits I have, perhaps, a double onus to keep the record straight. Buddhism developed a sophisticated psychological approach two thousand years before the modern world discipline of psychology was invented. Psychological investigations have gone on throughout Buddhist history and the result is a gold mine of knowledge, experience, theory, and practice from which we contemporary people can learn a great deal, but although Buddhism has given rise to this treasure, Buddhism is not fundamentally or exclusively a psychology.

My contention is not that we should return to a past that is now irretrievable. It is that while accepting that Buddhism is changing at a cultural level and finding new forms of expression and organization, we should acknowledge that it is more than merely an expression of modernity using elements of Asian terminology. The most forceful way of doing this is to acknowledge that it is more than a way of life, more than a philosophy, more important and profound than a mere cultural artifact—that it is a religion.

Buddhism is commonly said to be about relieving or abolishing suffering. This can be taken as a worthy humanitarian goal that could have little to do with religion. A methodology that overcomes suffering by training the mind is a psychotherapy. There is, thus, a case to be made that Buddhism is a psychotherapy, and if one were to take abolishing suffering, or achieving happiness, as the goal of Buddhism, then one could claim that Buddhism is primarily, or even nothing other than, such therapy. Such a line of rhetoric can then be used to integrate Buddhism within the frame of modern, secular hedonistic ideas. Doing so, however, involves discarding most of what Buddhism actually consists of and missing the point of the Founder’s original teaching.

Just as it is possible to present Buddhism as a psychology, we can also look at other things that Buddhism has given rise to. Buddhism has generated great cultures that have played prominent parts in history together with their many constituent ways of life, roles, forms of organization, social structures, politics, economics, and sciences. Modern academic investigation finds in this history fascinating areas for study and research. Some modern people adopt aspects of some of these traditional cultures and find it satisfying to do so. They wear Buddhist style clothes, sit on the floor, and have houses full of Eastern artifacts. They study *thangka* painting, or create Zen gardens. Many people now have Buddha figures as garden or household ornaments. These things look fine and contribute to a more gentle tenor of life. Buddhism has given rise to treasures such as these. Buddhism, however, is not fundamentally a culture. It has bred many cultures of great diversity. Buddhism is not fundamentally a way of life. There are many ways of life that can be considered to be Buddhist. Buddhism is not, basically, a style. There are many Buddhist styles. Buddhism has its views of economics and society, but Buddhism is not fundamentally a mode of social welfare. These things are all expressions of something more fundamental. Buddhism is a religion. Only a religion could generate such a diversity of riches permeating every aspect of life.

The Buddha gave remarkable codes of ethics tailored to different groups of people, to monks and nuns, to lay people, and to those who would follow an altruistic *bodhisattva* path. To this day we can learn a great deal from this ethical science. However, Buddhism is not fundamentally a system of ethics. Buddhism is a religion.

The Buddha was sometimes referred to as a doctor of the soul, and perhaps also of the body. It is likely his early disciples, wandering from place to place, not only taught the fundamentals of his doctrine, but also functioned in many cases as healers and medical practitioners. Many modern people are particularly concerned about health. They employ techniques drawn from Buddhism for stress relief, for an improved diet, for deep relaxation, for the treatment of depression, for massage, and so on. All this is wonderful. Buddhism has given rise to such treasures, but Buddhism is not fundamentally a health cure. Buddhism is a religion. The purpose of Buddhism is not stress relief. Buddha did not teach a method to help busy executives survive better in the rat race.

It is because Buddhism is a religion that it has been able to generate such richness. From the perspective of secular, humanistic materialism it is possible to see a value in many of the things to which Buddhism has given rise, but it is not really possible to see how they have come about because such an approach does not value the processes that constitute the substance of religion and does not recognize the religious nature of the human being. In fact, it consciously, deliberately, and systematically excludes them.

Modernity sees the fruits of Buddhism as its substance and then wonders how it can be so diverse. The substance of Buddhism, however, is what gives rise to all these fruits and this substance is not part of the materialistic scheme of things. In fact, it involves and is crucially dependent upon a renunciation of such materialism. It is this renunciation that modernity cannot admit, yet which is at the core of the Buddha’s dispensation.

In Buddhism, the spiritual is primary and the physical is a domain in which spirit acts. In modernity, the physical is primary and the spiritual, if it is acknowledged at all, is the epiphenomenon. For Buddhism to survive and continue to produce such wonderful fruit we must not cut off its root in this way. Although Buddhism is, in some respects, very different from the religions we were used to in the past, at core it is a spiritual matter.

Many contemporary thinkers have asserted that Buddhism is not a religion in order to fit it into our culture. They want to create an American Buddhism or a European Buddhism, in which the encompassing frame is American culture or European philosophy. However, if you cut Buddhism down to fit into one of these frames you cut off the essence and root.

Buddhism is not something with which to decorate our existing materialistic culture. Using Buddhist methods to help one be more efficient at work, or cope with the stress of a go-getting lifestyle, is decoration of this kind.

Buddhism has entered this materialist world sometimes disguised as a saleable commodity. In a world where money is the measure of all things, this is the disguise you need to gain entry. Another measure is popularity. One wins by getting more votes. Votes and prices, however, have no necessary relationship to quality or depth. Buddhism aims to deepen life, not trivialize it. Measures are abstract, useful for some purposes, but never touch the essence of anything. No measure can tell you how beautiful something is. None can tell you how pure a person’s heart or soul may be. The science of measurement is valuable and utilitarian. The soul of religion is something else. It is a different domain of existence. It is the one that makes life worth living.

Sometimes it is said that [Buddhism is scientific](http://tricycle.org/magazine/scientific-buddha). This assertion would put Buddhism somehow within the frame of science, but Buddhism has much that would not fit into that frame.

We should not muddle up science and scientism. Scientism is a modern philosophy. Scientism is not Buddhistic because it is the attempt to make the restrictive rules of science into the dogmas by which the whole of life should be governed. Scientism is a different religion and a rather narrow one and it would be a tragedy if Buddhism in the West were reduced to it. Actually, scientism as one finds it in ordinary members of the public is largely based on a version of science that was superseded in the early decades of the 20th century. I have met people of this persuasion who say that “One should not believe anything that science has not proved.” Fortunately or unfortunately, we have discovered that proving is not something that science does. Sometimes science disproves, but science always has an open frontier: it is always open to the new case that overturns what has been thought to be true up to now. Science demonstrates, but such demonstrations are never ultimate or final. We have seen so many revolutions in science in the past century that nobody should be in doubt of this. It does not make science redundant that its findings are so often overturned. It is in the nature of the situation. Science implies that there must be an incalculable amount that we do not know. In this respect science is Buddhistic.

Scientism, however, seeks to restrict our vision of the universe to things that are physically demonstrable. Most of the things that are important to most people—love, loyalty, faith, goodness, meaning, purpose—do not fall into such a category. As a philosophy, therefore, scientism is limited. It’s popularity is based on a misreading of the prestige that currently attaches to technology. The proposition that one should believe nothing that is not empirically demonstrable is itself not empirically demonstrable.

An extension of the popularity of scientistic ways of thinking has become the way that many people currently approach Buddhism as though it were a collection of techniques. Certainly Buddhism has generated many techniques. This is another of its richnesses, but the tendency to see it as being merely technique, or merely practice, is a function of the modern world’s worship of technology, not a true representation of Buddhism. It is just another case of picking the fruit while not seeing the root.

Buddhism is a religion. The common ground—perhaps the only one—of all schools of Buddhism is a religious act called taking refuge. We take refuge in the three treasures: the buddha, dharma, and sangha. Buddha is the supreme source of teaching, love, compassion, and wisdom. Dharma indicates the fundamentals of life and being. Sangha, in this context, is the assembly of spiritually awakened beings. Taking refuge in these three has salvific power. The popular view is that the aim here is to join the sangha, learn the dharma, and thereby become a buddha. That, however, is not refuge. Refuge is not about taking these jewels in our hands, it is about ourselves being held by them.

The mystique of this act is not something that can be grounded in materialism or psychology. It has material and psychological consequences, but they are incidental. The whole purpose is to transcend such considerations and open the possibility of being liberated from them.

Each deepening of refuge is a lessening of ego. More faith, less ego. Thus Buddhism finds salvation beyond self. It is not a collection of methods for greater self-development, self-assertion, self-cherishing, self-­esteem, or anything of the kind. Rather the opposite. Buddhism is not narcissism. The devotee is encouraged to be ever mindful of the objects of refuge, to bow to them, make offerings, revere and worship them. Being mindful of their supreme qualities one becomes more aware of one’s own deficiency. Becoming more aware of the deficiency of self, one’s need to take refuge increases in intensity. Finally one lets go of self entirely, takes refuge wholeheartedly and enters nirvana.

Taking refuge is an act of faith. To think that taking refuge is just like joining a worldly organization is to miss the essence and to reduce the supreme mystery to a mundane procedure. Far from reducing mystery to mundanity, Buddhism is about infusing the mundane with the sacred.

Buddhism’s foundation is faith. This faith is based in real, close-to-the-bone, experience. We find that the body is not reliable; the mind is not reliable; thoughts are not reliable, emotions are not reliable, circumstances are not reliable, social status is not reliable; the present moment is not reliable. No technique or methodology will make them so. Direct awareness of the present and of the sequence of things occurring demonstrates to us the unreliability of all that the worldly mind considers as self. Awareness alone would leave us frightened and helpless. Therefore we need mindfulness and the other factors of enlightenment that flow from it. We need mindfulness of the treasure that is available to us. Initially we may think it is our own treasure, but this is just the conceit of the self reasserting itself. The treasure is universal and unconditional, but each of us encounters it in a unique way. Buddha speaks to each of us in our own language. Thus everybody has some spiritual treasure to rely upon if they will just heed it. Buddhism helps us to do so with ever-greater depth and confidence.

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*Adapted from*Buddhism is a Religion*, by David Brazier, with the permission of Woodsmoke Press.*