

1. Does modern science lend support to Buddhist ideas about the human predicament?
2. Does modern science lend support to Buddhist ideas about the human mind?

Modern science supports the Buddha's diagnosis of the human dilemma, which consists of conceiving suffering as an inherent part of human existence and how to deal with it. That diagnosis consists mainly on elaborating Four Noble Truths that affirm the existence, cause, and liberation from suffering (and here it is important to clarify that "suffering" is a translation of Pali into "dukkha", that is, the term expression expands to distress, disappointment, frustration and inability to satisfy). The first two Noble Truths, as seen in the lecture "The Two First Noble Truths", deal more directly with the relationship between human beings and suffering. The first Noble Truth refers to dukkha and its undeniable existence throughout human experience, the impossibility to achieve total satisfaction. The second Noble Truth attests the cause of the dukkha, which would be directly related to cravings, expectations, and desires whether it is to maintain social status, manage a relationship, improve your resume, eat a pizza and so on always leading us to dissatisfaction, anguish, frustration, suffering, dukkha.

As seen in the lecture "Evolutionary Psychology and the First Two Noble Truths", evolutionary psychology can find justifications that explain why our brain conditions us to dissatisfaction. Roughly speaking, the objective of the species is to pass on their genes to the next generations. With that information in mind, what if we were amazed at our Sunday lunch and didn't want to eat anymore? What if after a wonderful night with the person we like, we never felt libido again? It is precisely our inability to fail to satisfy ourselves that drives us to live longer and have a better chance of reaching our "natural goal".

However, the determinism of suffering seems open to challenge. As seen in the class "The Eightfold Path", Buddha, in the Third Noble Truth, affirms as truth the possibility of ceasing suffering, of being freed from disappointments, of being able to get rid of dissatisfactions and reach the state of clarity, liberation, nirvana. The fourth Noble Truth concerns the Eightfold Path, a code of conduct and practices (such as and mainly meditation) that you would be responsible for leading us to see the truth about us, the feelings, freeing us from the cycle of suffering.

The liberation proposed by the Eightfold Path is based on the need to adapt to the Dharma (translated from Pali, it can be conceived as "universal, moral, and objective truth"), seeing reality clearly. What would prevent us from this is our mind, which, conditioned by extremely partial feelings, emotions, and impressions, would be responsible for showing us a disappointment reality, totally uncommitted to the objective truth of the universe. According to the Buddhist teacher Yifa, when you act with great emotion, grab it as true. But in fact, and that perception would be conceived through meditation, these sensations and feelings are not true.

Modern psychology provides a strong foundation for a Buddhist ideas about human mind. In the lecture "Feeling and Illusions" was presented an experiment that looks at how our sensations can directly intervene in how we interpret the reality. The experiment "Alligator or Squirrel: Musically Induced Fear Reveals Threat in Ambiguous Figures" consisted of presenting to a group three images in different contexts. The images were ambiguous figures drawings, with the possibility that in the same image different figures could be interpreted (in that case, drawings that represent a squirrel or alligator, cooking pot or ax, and rope or snake). The drawings would be exposed three times, at each time a different type of music would be played (happy and scary music) or there would be no music. In cases that happy music and no music was played, the results did not show a significant effect on the group's perception. However, in the scary music context, the associations of images with elements that offer danger have increased extremely significantly. The group's feelings had undoubtedly directly influenced their perception of reality.

Evolutionary psychology looks at homo sapiens as a species whose goal is to pass its genes on to the next generation. Being able to stay alive is undeniably a significant factor in achieving that goal. From that evolutionary point of view, perceptions distorted by feelings, these false positives, are important tools for human survival as it prevents unnecessary risks and exposures. Suppose someone is swimming in a lake with warnings pointing to possible alligator appearances. If she sees something emerging from a distance, it is much more advantageous (from a natural selection perspective) that she believes that is, in fact, an aligátor. Thus, she values her life, guaranteeing her survival, even though that may be an old trunk. Better safe than sorry, even if it leads to a distorted view of reality, distancing you from Dharma and leading you to Dukkha. Fortunately, Buddhism seems to be here to help.