Buddhism Final

Does modern science lend support to Buddhist ideas about the human mind?

Does modern science lend support to the logic behind Buddhist meditation practice?

Modern science and Buddhism share a really special relationship, in that they work not only synergistically with one another, but that the ancient practice of Buddhism encourages and embraces modern science as a way to explore the human condition.

Modern science in many ways does support both the Buddhist ideas about the human mind, and lends support to the logic behind the Buddhist meditation practice.

The human mind is our central command. In a species that is known for venerating intellectual achievement, one of the most esoteric methods of using the mind is for the work of wisdom, which, in the Buddhist sense, comes only when someone is willing to unlearn a life of learning and make space for emptiness.

The modular models of the mind tend to support the idea of no-self in the Buddhist tradition. From a modern, secular, and naturally selective point of view, it seems that the human mind has developed a way of being for itself that causes it to get close to it’s own significance by questioning that significance. Modern research psychologists have reorganized the brain into different modules, as in different areas of the brain light up and are utilized in different combinations for different life experiences, thusly resulting in different behaviors. For example, instead of dividing the brain into different areas responsible for anger, depression, sadness, happiness, contentment, or joy, and assigning one part of the brain to each emotional experience, the modular view looks at it more holistically. More than one area of the brain can contribute to each emotional experience, from the understanding that the mind is a far more complex structure than just one area of the brain being responsible for one emotion. In a way like the entire group of internal organs participate in digestion or respiration, many areas of the brain get enrolled in one emotion or reaction.

From a Buddhist point of view, this helps to comprehend the idea of no-self. The default mode network is a network within the brain that is activated during typical down time in our daily lives. In experienced meditators, this area/these areas of the brain have the ability to be shut down. Studies have shown this is shut down during meditation for many meditators, and for other meditators it is shown to be active during meditation, but shut down during daily activity. For non-meditators this part of the brain has largely been shown to not be deregulated and stays active. This default system of the mind is just that: a default system, like being stuck in a rut, being stuck in the continuous loop of unceasing thoughts that can make us feel trapped or believe our own lies. It is through the disconnection of this loop that freedom can be experienced, and modern science has shown this.

Modern science has also shown a deregulation in a part of the brain associated with the ego called the claustrum, a part of the insula which is related to a sense of the experience of self. Studies have also shown that many types of Buddhist meditation help to override this part of the ego-self, with the exception of loving-kindness meditation.

From a evolutionary point of view, this seems counterintuitive to survival because it has the effect of taking priority off of the organism trying to survive. In fact, the whole of the meditation practice itself seems nonsensical and superfluous if taken solely from a evolutionary point of view, because it isn’t necessary for survival.

From a scientific viewpoint, Buddhist practices for meditation are thoroughly supported by modern science, especially with the examples from studies of individuals thriving and overcoming incredible physical feats as a result, as in the example of the university professor who got dental work done with no anesthesia. This shows that through consistent practice of detachment from both self and detachment from reaction, a deeper and more connected experience of life can be attained when, leaning in to intense emotional experience, the reaction to that experience dissipates and a brand new possibility of experience is born. In the example of getting dental work done with a drill, there are typically two occurrences happening at once: the pain from the drill, and the patient’s reaction to it. Typically someone would experience these two things as being the same thing, because of attachment to “being” the physical body. However, with Buddhist disciplines and practices, it’s possible to transcend that experience as “being me” and tuning in to it’s impermanence suggests such a new development of the mind (where pain is REALLY felt) it’s possible to get your jaw drilled on without the aid of intense numbing drugs.

Modern science, therefore, does support the Buddhist idea of the mind and the logic behind a meditation practice. It supports the idea of no-self, or non-attachment to suffering, and to the changes that are clearly made in the experiences that come with inhabiting our physical forms.