

Low Cholesterol Sūtra

Lopez, D. S. Jr. (2012) *The Scientific Buddha: his Short and Happy Life* New Haven and London: Yale University Press 168 pp. ISBN: 978-0300159127

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Every era has the Buddha it deserves. Or rather, every era has the Buddha it can understand. The contemporary Buddha is the 'Scientific Buddha', a fashionable offshoot of which is 'mindfulness meditation', a thoroughly anaesthetized form of Buddhism; sadly, the only one known to most therapists.

In this enlightening and provocative book, Lopez traces the origin of the Scientific Buddha to the early nineteenth century, to the birth of philology and the obliging response of Asian monastics to the missionaries' anodyne portrayal of the Buddha as a serene Victorian gentleman. This view was in tune with the misguided universalism of the era which, as the Empire demanded, was prone to assimilating and neutering Buddhist teachings, discarding both their existential edge and their religious component, diverting them towards the dispensation of the proverbial opium for the people.

When Burma came under British rule in 1885 and the king was overthrown, the monk chosen by the king to oversee the monastic community lost his post. "This led to disorganization and a number of monks took on the task of preserving the dharma" (p. 99), through teaching the sūtras and the practice of meditation. Among these was U Nārada (1870-1955), who chose the Buddha's *Discourse on the Foundation of Mindfulness* simplifying its instructions and choosing selected passages. In 1954 a monk from Sri Lanka, Nyanaponika Thera learned what was by now known as 'the Burmese method' and wrote *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation* (1965) which marketed 'mindfulness' as a universal, de-contextualized practice and a vital message for all who want to "master the mind and wish to develop its latent faculties of greater strength and greater happiness".

Since the publication of this book in 1965, there has been a steady increase in the occurrence of the word 'mindfulness' ... a word that rarely appeared prior to 1950, with an unbroken ascent since the early 1980s. From Burma, mindfulness meditation spread to other countries in Southeast Asia and to Sri Lanka and then to India, where youthful seekers from Europe and America enrolled in meditation retreats ... The 'mindfulness' that is now taught in hospitals and studied in neurology laboratories is ... a direct result of the British overthrow of the Burmese king" (pp 98-99)

It would be a mistake to presume that mindfulness as we know it (mainly MBSR or 'Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction), is all there is to the Buddhist practice of mindfulness. The original meaning of the Sanskrit term *smṛti*, translated as 'mindfulness', is memory. Memory of what? There are forty objects worth remembering, the Buddha says, and two are the most crucial: a) death is certain; b) the time of death is uncertain. The whole enterprise encourages a spirited refusal of our complacency: we are urged to strive as if our hair is on fire; we are told that all is burning and that we are trapped in a house on fire. The historical Buddha promoted stress induction; he did not preach the *Low Cholesterol Sūtra* but pointed out that life entails suffering: birth, aging, sickness and death; losing friends, gaining enemies, not finding what you want; finding what you don't want – all stress-inducing stuff. Remembering all this may bring about wisdom and a compassionate attitude for others traveling on the same boat.

It could be that the Scientific Buddha is one of the many 'emanation bodies' of the Buddha "who have appeared in the world, making use of skillful methods ... to teach a provisional dharma to those temporarily incapable of understanding the true teaching" (p. 121). He teaches a diluted Dharma, something to mollify our anxiety. He teaches this thing called 'mindfulness', and even then, a wishy-washy version. He teaches something no other Buddha had taught before: how to function in a dysfunctional world; how to, according to a poster in a hospital, "manage high blood pressure, sleep disorders, life-style changes" (p 97)

If *this* is what Buddhist mindfulness is, then Freud was right in equating Buddhism with the 'nirvana principle', in turn related to the death instinct.

Moreover, rather than presenting a philosophy and a practice which is truly *other* and as such potentially useful to western culture and to the psychological therapies in particular, the Scientific Buddha is in agreement with Darwin. In fact, since the Victorian era he even *sounds* like Darwin, simplistically equating the law of karma with the theory of evolution. He is also a neuroscientist, a validation now *de rigueur*, and one that endorses the view that the brain is the seat of the mind. He unleashes hundreds of 'Joy Detectives' experiments, showing on fMRI scans what neurons are fired in the brain of shaven-headed monks when they think 'compassionate' or 'wise' thoughts or, being Buddhist, 'non-thoughts'. After all, a monk's shaven head had always been a phrenologist's dream, even in the heyday of that pseudo-science, Phrenology, which claimed to determine a person's moral fiber and acumen by the shape of his skull.

Since the nineteenth century, the Buddha has been urged to play the part of an alternative savior, and Buddhism that of an alternative religion, one that does not raise significant objections to the prevalent scientific theories of the time. Darwin's Bulldog himself, Thomas Huxley, wrote of reincarnation as wholly compatible with the theory of evolution. Here we find the weakest section of the book, with the author presenting his own idealist views as Buddhist doctrine *tout court*. For example, anxious of a 'materialist' view presenting mind as an epiphenomenon of matter, he wholeheartedly endorses "the dichotomy between mind and matter" which he sees as "central to Buddhist thought", adding: "if mind does not precede matter nor persist beyond it, there could be no rebirth"(p. 77). This is a particular

interpretation of Buddhist thought endorsed by some traditions by not by others. A rebuttal of scientific Buddhism does not have to mean embracing a spiritualist Buddhism either. As Lopez himself wonderfully puts it: “The Buddha does not need to be preserved in aspic, all of his wondrous aspects kept intact, frozen in time, the founder of a dead religion” (p. 126). At the same time, he adds, “the Buddha does not need to be brought up to date, his teachings do not need to be reinterpreted into terms utterly foreign to what he taught ... We might let what the tradition says about the Buddha be heard” (ibid).

We might, I would add, respond to the Buddha’s invitation *ehipaśyika* ‘come and see’ and test his transformative teachings through a commitment to sincere practice.