

Friedrich G. Wallner and Gerhard Klünger (eds.)  
Buddhism – Science and Medicine

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# Buddhism – Science and Medicine

Interpretations, Applications,  
and Misuse

Edited by  
Friedrich G. Wallner and Gerhard Klünger

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Dedicated  
to  
Giselher Guttman



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# How Buddhist Philosophy can help us to identify the cultural sources of our global crises

*Friedrich Wallner und Michael Franck (University of Vienna)*

What I am going to offer is against our usual way of thinking – it is against the common sense – which is why I will start with few preliminary remarks to make comprehensible how I have reached these conclusions. Let me begin with a definition of culture: Culture is a framework of a group of people for their thinking, their feeling – basically for everything. It is something that is guiding our lives. Different cultures pose different frameworks. Highly developed cultures are complex, complicated and manifold frameworks. Thus it is very difficult to enter and also to get a glimpse beyond cultures. It is not impossible, but very difficult. The positive aspect is, that, as we have different cultures, we have different kinds of resources to solve problems. Limiting our options to solve problems by discarding the ways of thought other cultures have developed would be a waste of these valuable resources.

Regarding our culture I would like to refer to a famous philosopher, who has given, around a hundred years ago, a lecture at the University of Vienna. His name was Edmund Husserl and the talk he gave was called “The crisis of the European science and the transcendental philosophy”. In this speech Husserl addressed a tendency which increased over the last century: That science is moving more and more away from direct human understanding.<sup>1</sup>

In other cultures the process of science can be very different. Let us compare European thinking with that of classical China.<sup>2</sup> If we look at the European thinking we have an ontology which is looking for an unchangea-

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<sup>1</sup> Husserl has offered some solutions for this problem, which are very interesting, but, with all due respect, I think, are not working.

<sup>2</sup> This is the topic of numerous publications by Prof. Lan Fengli and myself.

ble basis of the changing things. Therefore we do not trust our senses and only consider valid what we have proven unto the last end.

Our methodology in science is based on induction and deduction – from the special cases to the general laws and back to the special cases. Our culture guides us to proceed in this way. In classical China there is the principle of Qu Xiang Bi Lei. It means to take an image and to go around to the other parts, compare and add qualities.

Another striking difference is that in Europe linear causal reasoning, while in China circular reasoning is predominant, which means that one point is explained by all other points. There is no causality in Chinese thinking. Causality is just a reduction – a very efficient one, but one that excludes a lot of possibilities.

If we look at the theoretical structure we can see that in Europe we have a separation between theory and practice. The practice comes after the theory. With the theory you can explain the practice. In classical China you have a unity of practice and theory. Keeping that in mind we can advance.

There are at least three crises in the contemporary world. The first one is the ecological crisis. Denying this one is pointless. The second crisis is the economic crisis. Through the history of the 20th century we have learned that Marxism is not working as a theory of human society. Now we are learning that Capitalism as well does not work. We have the absurd situation that billions are used to save institutions like banks while at the same time human beings are starving. Regarding the financial crisis we should consider that there is a lack of understanding about the workings of economy in our culture. The third crisis is the social and political one. Our high standard of living is only possible because many others are excluded – within our country and even more so between countries or continents. We cannot expect this to continue without any consequences. We are probably heading towards a catastrophe.

We can now ask, which aspects of our culture are the backgrounds of this crisis. Let us look at the important structural peculiarities of the western culture. One of these is the believe in the rational structure of the world. This is a believe not a fact. How should we prove it? We believe that it is possible to explain nature. It is possible of course. But is the explanation still nature?

The second peculiarity is the believe in an eternal background or essence of the world. This means that we believe that there is something which remains – a reality behind reality – and if we find it, we understand the world.

The third peculiarity is the reductive methodology of science.

The fourth one is connected with Christianity: An eschatological believe. By this I mean that we expect a linear progressive development. We think that we are heading towards a happy end – a final and probably eternal stage of perfection when human society has completed its development. (This becomes obvious in the philosophies of Marx or Hegel for example)

Let us now take a look at how these peculiarities are connected with the three mentioned crises:

The ecological crisis is based on our reductionism. The economical crisis is based on the eschatological convictions. Economical growth cannot go on infinitely. Thus all calculations presupposing it will fail in the long run. The social and political crisis is connected with the absolute claim of European rationalism and the impossibility to integrate irrational aspects of human actions.

But, however the most striking peculiarity is that our culture has two levels. We live in a double-level-culture. We have the level of the norms and the level of reality – the level of the laws and the level of the nature. In our ethics we have norms which should guide our behavior. This is not necessarily the case in every culture. One of the more fascinating aspects of Buddhism is that it works without this double-level-structure.

Before I continue I should now say a few words about Constructive Realism. It was a reaction on the crisis of descriptivism (in Philosophy of Science). In the 60's and 70's of the last century we saw that two convictions of contemporary Philosophy of Science had to be wrong: The believe that science describes the world and the believe that science is in an always positive progression. The first conviction is not compatible with the practice of scientists, the second one is not compatible with the history of science. If we look at the history of science it is not the case that a weaker theory is refuted and replaced with a better one, but rather a set of convictions, which is guiding a scientific discipline, is replaced by another set of convictions and rules.<sup>3</sup>

Also in the middle of the last century it became more and more apparent that other cultures have developed some type of science. And so one question puzzles me at this time: How is it possible that contradicting

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<sup>3</sup> This was elaborated by Thomas Kuhn in "The Structure of Scientific Revolutions".

worldviews – that contradicting scientific proposition systems – can both be true at the same time?

This is the basis of my research on Chinese Medicine. Some years ago I had a discussion with a pharmacologist. I was impressed by him, but finally he said: “But you must concede: There is only one truth.” It is the way of our culture to exclude alternatives by our notion of truth. The theoretical structure of Constructive Realism allows for several alternate explanations to be true.<sup>4</sup>

How can we handle the fact that different explanations of nature are possible at the same time?

One way would be tolerance. That would be a typically European approach. Even Popper probably would say, that we could be wrong. We do not yet know enough. But some point in the future we will solve the question and then there will only be one truth.

A better way would be to find out, why the other one comes to a different conclusion. By this way you may also happen to find out why you reached your results. The method to achieve this is strangification (*Verfremdung*). It was influenced by hermeneutics (by Gadamer for instance). In literature something similar was already in use, yet in science this was rather unusual. Strangification operates on the level of language. You take two proposition systems and put them into one another. Then you look more into detail until the result is getting absurd. After this you can ask why it became absurd. A joke shall serve us as an example. A school class gets the following math-exercise: Seven workers need four hundred hours to build a house. How long would it take 30 workers to do so? Little Max is fascinated and wonders how long it would take a million workers. His result comes down to 10.08 seconds. As he presents his calculation to the class some are laughing. You can see here the limits of quantification. (For example in Biology, which was a topic of Konrad Lorenz)

What I am trying to do is to use some of the intellectual resources of Buddhism to make our problems more understandable. As soon as we understand, we are on a good way. We cannot hope that we solve them as easily just with philosophy, but at least we can identify them. It was the tragedy of Karl Marx that he (maybe not so much but definitely his followers) believed that he had solved all the problems and knows all the solutions. This is not

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<sup>4</sup> The theoretical structure of Constructive Realism several alternate explanations to be true. Cf: Wallner: How to Deal with Science if you care for other Cultures.

the case here. If we look at the mainstream of Buddhism – especially, but not only, Nāgārjuna and Buddhadasa – at what they have developed, we can try to use it in respect to understand our problems. Buddhism, in my view, can offer a lot to Western thinking. In this paper I will point out five aspects which could change our lives if we understand them correctly.

1.

The first aspect is that of Openness. It sounds so simple, but it is not. During the 90's I met two very impressive people: the Dhalai Lama and Pope John Paul II. The Dhalai Lama held a seminar for foreigners in Podgaya. To us he said: "I recommend you: Do not abandon your religion. Keep your religion." (He also said this on other occasions to other people.) Two or three years later at the catholic University in Pune I met pope John Paul II. In a speech he gave in front of a small audience he said: "Hindus are beings of darkness." First I was shocked, as were my Indian colleagues. But then I realized he was consequently following the catholic believe. He did his duty. He was supposed to bring them into the light. Regarding this, what the Dhalai Lama did was irresponsible. He should have done the same. This is typical for Western thinking. We look for the right way, which is the way that is following the norms. (Two Levels).

One should not confuse Openness with tolerance. Tolerance presupposes an uncertainty in my opinion, that could be cleared some day in the future, when hopefully I will have gathered sufficient information. It is like saying: Keep your believes for now, since I have not yet acquired the arguments to refute them. Or to put it less harsh: Keep your believes for I am not so sure about mine myself. This is not Openness in the sense of Buddhism.

Let us consider the theoretical basis of Buddhist Openness. Here I want to quote a simple statement by Buddhadasa<sup>5</sup>: "Nibbana exists in Saṃsāra". If you know Nirvana and Saṃsāra you might be surprised. To us these are contradictions. Saṃsāra means the circle of our desires, while as for Nirvana, everybody thinks it means that we are going back into totality and then everything is over. In common western interpretation Nirvana is understood as entering the absolute. Buddhadasa meant that in order to understand Nirva-

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<sup>5</sup> Buddhadasa: Me and Mine, p. 141.

na, we must understand the working of Saṃsāra. We must understand that there are interdependence's, which are influencing each other and as soon as we have understood these interdependent influences we are entering Nirvana. One important point for me in interpreting Buddhism is that it is a totally logical system of thinking. It has nothing to do with the nonsense it often is associated with in the West. (Meditation is not a psycho-technique as it is often understood).

We are going deeper now and take a look at the background of this insight. If you look at other texts from this tradition<sup>6</sup> they have a style of argumentation that I would call arguing inside. They don't leave or transcend their context, they are arguing from inside their context. This simply means that the argumentation is not depending on any instances from outside to be validated or justified.<sup>7</sup>

This way of argumentation is a very important style. It is always connected with ethical and psychological arguments, but it is neither ethics nor psychology in our sense. It is not using rules or emotions, it is something that is connecting immediate experiences and looking where they are going. This is similar to what phenomenology in the sense of Husserl wanted – and could not achieve. Such is the restriction of our culture. We cannot just say tomorrow I start with Buddhism and leave my culture behind. It is not so easy, maybe even impossible.

To me it is fascinating in this run of arguments, that Buddhism offers an ethical system. But it is not normative ethics, or intuitive ethics or an ethics of duties. Regarding all the great ethical theories of Europe I come to think that the reason we have so many problems with ethics is because it is against our way of thinking. Even the theoretically most fascinating system – the Kantian ethics – which is so wonderfully and elegantly construed, sadly is not working, while other, better working, systems do not have good arguments. The reason for this is because we cannot integrate the practice into our theoretical procedure. What Buddhism here offers is an ethical system by self development. Like Constructive Realism it works through self devel-

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<sup>6</sup> For instance other texts from Buddhadasa or the Pāli Canon

<sup>7</sup> You can find similar ideas in Wittgenstein: Tractatus Sentence 5.6.

opment. Constructive Realism offers an understanding of science via self development.<sup>8</sup>

2.

If we look at the structure of argumentation in Buddhism than we find that they look for relations. Everything there is based on relations. They do not look for substance, but relations. If you look to the relations, then everything is dissolving by itself. If concepts are defined by relations, than shifts within the network of relations can change a concept completely. No stable meaning is possible anymore, since it depends on the current relations which depend on the context from which it is looked at.<sup>9</sup> Here lies the sense of the emptiness. It is not concentrated on something eternal.

Buddhism is a relationist culture and ours a substantialist one. They are looking for relations, we are looking for substance. Why is Relationism so important for us? Because it overcomes the Western need for normative instances. Now you could say that if we lose the norms chaos will break out. The common opinion is that the absence of norms would lead to an anarchistic state where everybody does what he or she wants and all civilization would collapse. In everyday live this might be terrible and in science we would be unable to tell true from false. Relationism shows that it is possible to abandon the European double-level-worldview without descending into chaos. It is also possible to abandon bad metaphysics. There is no such thing as metaphysics of Buddhism. But in Europe even the people fighting metaphysics have at least some sort of metaphysics. For example the Vienna Circle. Because our thinking is structured so that knowledge must presuppose ignorance. We must always presuppose something which is sustaining our position.

We can interpret the structure of Buddhist thinking as the interdependence of co-arising entities. Everything is developing, everything is arising and is dissolving and everything connects with everything and if you would understand all these relations then you have reached Nirvana. This is clearly a state which is impossible to reach.

For instance in Nāgārjunas Ratnāvalī you find a wonderfully argument from which you can deconstruct the western ontology. It is the argument of

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<sup>8</sup> That is the difference to the Vienna Circle. I like logic, but I do not see logic as the measure of right and wrong.

<sup>9</sup> Such a view clearly refutes the idea of meaning as a simple object-representation.

Relationism<sup>10</sup> According to Nāgārjuna the concepts must be designed by each other and not by eternal consequences. For example you cannot understand darkness without knowing light, or poverty without knowing wealth. Concepts get their meaning through their relation to each other.<sup>11</sup> This introduces a Relationist ontology which is neither Empiricist, nor Idealistic.

At this point I would like to mention Alfred North Whitehead. He was a famous outsider who did a very good job in mathematics together with Russell and who had a very interesting ontology: The ontology of the event. It was an insight that we must get away from the notion of substance. But in this point he was not successful. Nearly no reactions were provoked by his thoughts. By the way Wittgenstein had very similar ideas.<sup>12</sup>

### 3. *The Concept of Truth:*

We should of course not only blindly admire Buddhism. In some works they have logical mistakes. For example there were two concepts of truth. Before Nāgārjuna there was the opinion that we have one level of truth for our life-world and another level of the truth for the so called Dharma, which is the higher truth. Nāgārjuna converted it and developed the idea that the hidden truth is not the noble truth. What is hidden can be revealed, so it can not be somehow higher, since the only difference is that it is not yet revealed. The hidden truths are the truths of our life-world, the conditions of our life. The supreme truth (the noble truth) is what cannot be said with language, what cannot become linguistic. I would interpret this as what I call Wirklichkeit<sup>13</sup>. It is the same thinking-architecture. The truth of the concrete procedures

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<sup>10</sup> It is also called the argument of Relativity.

<sup>11</sup> By this a lot of puzzling question could be solved (or dissolved). For example that by Aristotle for why is something instead of nothing. Aristotle saw clearly that you cannot talk about Being and Nothing separately.

<sup>12</sup> Wittgenstein: Tractatus, Sentences 5.6 – 5.641.

<sup>13</sup> Wirklichkeit: The inspiration for me to come up with this concept was Maturanas differentiation between what are the conditions of our living and what we recognize by construction (The Tree of Knowledge). A lot of things are going on, which we are not constantly aware of. For example the blood pressure. If you get through science aware of blood pressure, than you make it a construct. As long as you do not reflect it, it is presupposed. Or to refer to Robert M. Pirsig (Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance): Did the laws of gravity exist before Sir Isaac Newton? If you take the laws of nature as something which is embodied in nature, than you have a problem. The point of constructivism is that they were not.



presupposes something that we cannot recognize. This he calls supreme truth.

#### *4. Buddhist logics: The Tetralemma*

The point of the Tetralemma is that it is an affirmation and that it is a negation of the negation. Thus it develops a system as a run for logical thinking which is completely different to our thinking. In some Buddhist dialogues it goes like this: Is something based on this and this – No. Is it based on this? – No. Is it based on this? – No. This cannot be formalized in the Western way. Extremes and passages of poor argumentation are thereby excluded. The Tetralemma abandons the the principle of identity and negation. There are no normative principles and so it leads the path to Relationism.

What you can learn is that logic has here another function – a heuristic function; it encourages you to find another way of thinking. It has not the function of the Western logic to stabilize the situation. Western logic makes a situation stable – it excludes developments – the Tetralemma encourages developments. It shows that logic is connected with human activity.<sup>14</sup>

#### *5. Buddhist concept of experience*

It is not the same as intuitive experience, although it might seem that way, but it is not the same. It overcomes the Difference in experience in which the subject is just a passive observer. It is also not the concept of experience in the hermeneutic, phenomenological way in which the self, the living man is involved in the experience. Because the self we find here is not a personal self and it is not a transcendental self either. The human being here is completely integrated into the interdependence of nature, but does not lose his specificity as a human being. He is integrated and depending on what is going on in nature. If we compare this with the classical Chinese way of experience we find some interesting differences. In classical Chinese thinking only the phenomena are real. In Buddhism the phenomena are not separated from the things. The phenomena are the realities of the human beings and the connections of the phenomena – the act of describing of one phenomenon with the other one, from the background or from the aspects of the other one – is the way of Chinese thinking. This is a different way than classical Buddhist thinking. Therefore we could say Buddhism in this aspect is a more

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<sup>14</sup> There are similar concepts in family-therapy.

radical way of understanding experience. The Chinese way is closer to the Western understanding, only that the Chinese do not need the real things.

What I have presented here is meant to encourage you to develop projects and to research further into the texts. Clearly we have to work interdisciplinary and intercultural, otherwise it does not work.

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# Enlightened Life

## *Integration of Buddha's Teaching and Biology*

*Somporn Promta (Department of Philosophy, Chulalongkorn University)*

### *1. The problem*

Before going into the detail of the paper, I would like to explain the problem that leads me to the writing of this paper, briefly. The problem consists of two parts. The first part concerns a theoretical understanding of Buddhist philosophy; and the second one concerns a practical application of Buddhist philosophy to some academic subjects. To be short, I have noticed that there is a kind of understanding, which could be problematic, among Buddhists themselves and those who are not Buddhist but interested in applying Buddhism to their disciplines of work—for example, psychology.

The first thing that I have noticed forms a thing called by me the theoretical problem here. According to the general attitude of Buddhists, the Buddha mainly teaches 'how to have a perfect life.' This attitude is not the problem as it accords with the Buddha's teaching found anywhere in the texts that record his teaching. The way the Buddha presents to the world through his life (his doing and teaching) is nothing but the way that leads a person's life to a kind of perfection. The highest goal in practicing the teaching of Buddha, which is called the *dharma*, is undoubtedly to attain a thing called *nirvana*. And one of the various meanings of nirvana is a perfect state of the human life. Sometimes, the Buddha explains nirvana as the total freedom from the *conditions of life* that cause us suffering.

We can say that the perfect life in the view of Buddha, like the concept of freedom in philosophical ethics, consists of two aspects: *positive* and *negative*. Positive aspect of the perfect life manifests itself through the highest potential *to do* the good things; while the negative aspect of it is given in a form of the potential *to not be* under the influence of the evils. A normal life in the view of Buddha is naturally created to have the limited potential to

act and be under the influence of human nature in some certain way, and that thing can be found in the life of people in general. The perfect life is actually based on the normal life. Or, we can say that the normal life which is cultivated to some higher point is the perfect life. The Buddha teaches that there are two main levels of the perfect life. The first level, which is the basic one, is the worldly perfect life; and the second level, which is the higher, is the unworldly perfect life. The criterion used by the Buddha to distinguish between them is: the concept of suffering. The worldly perfect life has more suffering than the unworldly one.

In the view of Buddhists, in general, the idea of the perfect life as taught in Buddhism can be studied and understood as a '*standalone*' concept. That is, to have a perfect life, a person needs to practice the dharma only; and that is enough. It seems that there are two versions of the understanding of the dharma as a standalone concept. The first version, the strong one, says that to have a perfect life, a person has to practice the dharma only, and other things are prohibited. The second version, the weak one, just says that only practicing the dharma is enough to free a person from the bondage of life; other things are not needed, even though some of them are useful.

For me, these two versions of attitude to the teaching of Buddha share the same problem. In short, we have to remind ourselves that before the happening of Buddhism, or any 'religion,' on earth mankind has long been created, by God or not is not the problem. But the problem is a human life is created before religion; and when the religion has been created by some men in the world, religion is a thing designed to use with a human life. If we have two things. One is older and another is newer. The older one is chosen by nature to 'be' like that; and the new one is created and chosen by man to do something with the older. Just simple reasoning suggests us that we have to adapt the latter one when it is applied to the former. Our foot is older than the shoe. So, it is not right to adapt the foot for the shoe. On the contrary, anybody knows we have to make the shoe in such a way that it best serves the foot, and not to make the foot serve the shoe.

The motto 'make the shoe to best serve the foot' expresses a kind of naturalistic attitude. In ethics, we have a kind of ethical theory named naturalistic ethics. This kind of ethics is created for the reason that ethical ideas are newer than the human life—like the shoes. So, it is not right to present ethical theories without considering what human nature is; and what is the way human beings do and not do in general when they are confronted with ethical dilemmas. Certainly, ethics is a normative theory, including the natu-

ralistic version; and this might be a thing that distinguishes between ethics and other descriptive theories such as psychology. Naturalistic ethics states that we have to adjust ethical ideas to serve human nature. This does not mean that man does not have anything to be changed in their life. We have something to be improved. But such improvement should be understood as naturally possible to make the life as *'the default'* better.

Buddhists in general do not need Buddhism to be a kind of naturalist philosophy. I have argued in my work on the primitive teaching of Buddha that the Buddha never overlooks that human nature comes before his religious principles.<sup>1</sup> It is the later version of Buddhism, *Theravada* and *Mahayana*, alone that teaches as if it is not necessary to be interested in the deep nature of human beings.

The first problem that I have found and I need to explore it in the article is this. It is the problem found among Buddhists in general. The essence of the problem is: they believe that the teaching of Buddha concerning the perfect life is a standalone device. To see the problem in this kind of thought is not difficult. The teaching of Buddha is newer and manmade product; while the human life is older and naturally given. The Buddha's teaching could be compared to the shoe; and the human life is like the foot. The problem occurs when we try to make the foot friendly to the shoe; and not the shoe friendly to the foot.

The above problem is theoretical. As we know, a practice follows a theory. When the present form of Buddhism, I mean Theravada and Mahayana, has the theory in which the seriously study of human nature is ignored; the practice that follows such a theory would be problematic too. An example of the practical problem, as we are discussing now, is the failure of meditation practice found generally in Buddhist communities. I have discussed this problem in some articles that I have presented in the conference on Buddhist meditation.<sup>2</sup> I have seen that a kind of Buddhism that could be called 'Natu-

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<sup>1</sup> I was allowed by Chulalongkorn University to have a sabbatical last year. On the leave, I undertook a research to find out what is the philosophical position of Buddha before his death and his teaching becomes Theravada and Mahayana as seen today. The findings have been published in eight issues of Wisdom Magazine, a Thai version. (Volume 3, numbers 4-11.)

<sup>2</sup> For example, I had presented a paper entitled *'Meditation in Thailand: A New Interpretation'* at Mumbai. The paper was published in: Khammai Dhammasami and Charles Willemen, eds., *Buddhist Meditation: Texts, Tradition, and Practice*, Mumbai: Somaiya Publications, 2012.

ralist Buddhism' (I will define this term more next in the paper) might be something that the scholars of Buddhism, especially those who teach or involved in the teaching of meditation, welcome. And I understand that because the primitive spirit of Buddhism is a critical thought; to remind these scholars of the importance of the foot more than the shoe is something not difficult.

In folk Buddhism, the understanding of people concerning what the Buddha teaches has more problems. I do not consider this subject in the paper for the reason that if there is something not accurate in the folk practice of religion; that should be viewed as a practical problem, and not theoretical. This kind of problem would be reduced naturally when the academic study of religion is strong in the community.

The practical problem, which I have stated in the beginning of this article, is of the application of Buddhist philosophy to the academic subjects like medical science or psychology. In Buddhist countries such as Thailand and Sri Lanka, there are some scholars from other disciplines being of the interest that the teaching of Buddha would give some insight to solve the problems in their academic field or helps see a new way to compose a model for understanding phenomena in the fields. For example, some physicists think that the Buddhist philosophy of emptiness could be used as the ground in the research in theoretical physics. The problem is not concerned with the idea to apply Buddhist philosophy to other academic fields as far as Buddhism that we have used is academic. Modern writers on science, such as Fritjof Capra, are of the opinion that Eastern religions including Buddhism have some mystic thought that can be used as the ground to see the scientific profoundness. That is, according to these people, science and Buddhism share some activities and philosophical interests. Science aims at the understanding of the deepest nature of things in the universe. Buddhism, even though could be deemed as something narrower than science as it fundamentally aims at the promotion of happiness of humankind, ultimately has so many profound ideas concerning the nature of the universe and man. Happiness of life, in the view of Buddha, cannot be achieved by man without the knowledge concerning the nature of things in the world, because such knowledge will provide man with 'how to have the proper relation with nature.' In this sense, science and Buddhism share the interests in exploring natural world. However, as Buddhism is older wisdom and has accumulated collective profound thoughts for thousands of years, some modern scientists