The Problem with Buddhist Modernism: a response to Evan Thompson

Evan Thompson, *Why I am Not a Buddhist*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020, pb, 230pp, £12.99, also hardback and ebook

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ABSTRACT

There are various reasons why one might choose not to be a Buddhist, given diverging understandings of the fundamental commitments of Buddhism. This review-article offers an evaluation and response to arguments made by Evan Thompson in *Why I Am Not a Buddhist* (2020). Thompson provides a trenchant critique of trends in modern secular forms of Buddhism, drawing parallels between the 'constructed-self' of cognitive sciences and the illusory nature of self of Buddhist thought; offering scientific 'proof' for the truth of Buddhism; identification of Buddhism as 'mind science'; identification of the reductionism inherent in 'neural' Buddhism's attempt to validate Buddhist metaphysics by peeking inside the brain; evaluation of the secularist belief that mindfulness practice offers direct, 'unmediated' experience of reality; and the problematic nature of side-stepping questions of enlightenment or secularising notions like nirvana to better suit a Western audience. Thompson argues these concepts are more complex and contested than Buddhist Modernists acknowledge. While these critiques show why Thompson is not a Buddhist modernist, this article articulates why they pose no challenge to Buddhism as a lived philosophy and practice. Furthermore, while Thompson offers a careful reflection on the science-Buddhism dialogue there remain contextualising questions go unaddressed that leave one feeling more charitably inclined towards Buddhist Exceptionalists and their endeavours.

INTRODUCTION

Evan Thompson's *Why I Am Not a Buddhist* is a long-form essay offering a provocative challenge to the emergent currents of Buddhist Modernism within academia and society more generally. The title echoes Bertrand Russell's famous essay "Why I am Not a Christian," but this could be misleading, in that Thompson is not claiming Buddhism is a fundamentally mistaken worldview, but rather giving a firm telling-off to forms of Buddhist modernism emerging in the West. To describe what I take to be the crux of his critique I'll begin with

an anecdote, which should be familiar to any who has attended a modern Buddhist meditation retreat.

On the first day of retreat, you find your assigned cushion in the dimmed hall. You are sat in rows of indistinguishable such cushions, and before you the teachers sit on a raised platform – a mark of distinction. The teachers are, possibly, garbed in white – a further mark of distinction. In silence you begin to contemplate your breath while the teacher speaks. The teacher may begin by encouraging you with the notion that you're embarking on a quest; an investigation inward, into the nature of mind *itself*, an endeavour to let go of all pre-existent dogma and explore reality *as it is.*

This will commonly be understood, at least implicitly, by the modern practitioner to mean they are embarking upon an internal, or first-person, sort of scientific inquiry: a method of *inner* observation through rigorous introspection, that critically is to be understood as both *rational* and *scientific.* This, clearly, is a compelling picture for a secular western audience. Such a conception is vital for full participation in the retreat, given the innate scepticism many have inculcated regarding religious dogma. If you look closely, however, you might notice that you're not merely seeing things 'as they are', as is described. Rather there is a sense in which you are – as Evan Thompson notes – learning to *sculpt* your experience in a certain way. That is, you are being given certain concepts, like 'impermanence' and 'moment-to-moment arising', and you're applying these concepts as you attend to your experience.

This process is aided by the fact that retreats are generally held in silence, and so when you're given instructions, you're internalising these instructions and concepts much more deeply than in daily life. This could, perhaps reasonably, be described as related to modes of self-hypnosis, which are many times more potent in collective settings. Rather than seeing reality 'as it is', what one is experiencing may indeed be understood as a 'collective social construction' reinforced by the group setting and the dynamics at play between teacher, pupil, peers and tradition. None of this is to say that much of what occurs in our daily lives is anything other than collective social construction. This is also not to say that Buddhist retreats are without meaning, of anything short of profound transformative significance for many participants, or that insights cannot be garnered in this way; rather it is to throw sceptical light upon the notion that meditative insights are derived as it were 'in isolation'. Meditative insight, as with all insight, depends instead upon a certain context, and so conceiving of them as insights into what is objectively true requires some critical attention. Such critical attention is what Thompson's latest work offers: he demonstrates that such retreats are as much about *creating* a certain mode of experience as they are about *revealing* anything already there. I will unpack some of the central suggestion in what follows.

From Thompson's perspective, to say the above is not to discredit Buddhism, but rather merely to emphasise that Buddhism *really is* a religion, and religion involves community, text, tradition, and practice. As Thompson describes in an interview with *Lion's Roar* journal:

> the silence, the rituals, the sculpted practices – how you walk into the room, how you acknowledge or don't acknowledge others – the discourse you learn, the interviews you have with the teachers. All of this is a social, ritualistic construction that shapes people's inner lives. (December 31, 2020).

These shared practices, rituals and frameworks give meaning to life. However, when Buddhism is conceived as a scientific endeavour these elements create a tension. This is because science, as Thompson describes it, concerns 'the knowledge that we acquire when we are able to agree publicly and inter-subjectively on modes of investigation, ways of testing things, tools – like mathematics – that we can use to model and check things.' And yet in much contemporary discussion Buddhism, unique amongst religious traditions, appears to be given a free pass and presented as an empirical enquiry, compatible with the scientific endeavour, rather than as a doctrine of faith. The broader context of Buddhist practices are simply carved off – as we articulate in related work on Mindfulness and Embodied Cognition (Tempone-Wiltshire & Matthews, 2024b; Tempone-Wiltshire & Dowie, 2024b). As Thompson demonstrates, however, the question of compatibility or incompatibility is the wrong kind of question when discussing religion and science *tout court*. Since Thompson suggests religion ought not be viewed as inherently incompatible or compatible with science, the judgement will depend upon how one practises religion and how one thinks of science.

Backgrounding Thompson's Work

To understand the weight and value of Thompson's latest work it is crucial we consider the personal and intellectual story behind it. Evan Thompson, a professor of philosophy at the University of British Columbia, is well situated to offer this critique. He has followed closely, and been instrumental in, the emergence of Buddhism into the field of cross-cultural philosophy and remains one of the world's leading philosophers on the dialogue between Buddhism and science. Thompson has a long background in the mind sciences and a deep engagement with Buddhist studies, Indian philosophy and culture more generally. Thompson is the author of numerous influential works including *Mind in Life* (2010), *Waking, Dreaming, Being: Self and Consciousness in Neuroscience, Meditation, and Philosophy* (2014), and his perhaps most particularly noteworthy contribution: *The Embodied Mind*, co-authored with the neuroscientist Francisco

Varela and the psychologist Eleanor Rosch. This work, published in 1991, and republished with emendations in 2016, drew upon Buddhist philosophy and meditative practice to present a way of understanding the lack of a fixed essential self, and the discovery that the mind is a complex network of interdependent processes. This was a seminal project; the first book that related Buddhist philosophy to cognitive science and the scientific study of mind, and its influence has been profound and far reaching. For this reason, Thompson's latest contribution is particularly notable as a critique since he himself was a significant figure in bringing Buddhism into dialogue with contemporary science.

In *Why I Am Not a Buddhist*, Thompson is demonstrating that the emergent representation of Buddhism – *Buddhist Modernism* – paints a misleading picture of the 'true' nature of Buddhist philosophy and practice. Counter to the stream of thought he was so instrumental in instigating; Thompson's latest work seeks to explain how the goals of science and Buddhism in fact fundamentally differ. As such, efforts to seek their unification are wrongheaded and promote mistaken conceptions of both. As Thompson notes 'when Buddhist modernists say that Buddhism isn't a religion and try to use science to justify Buddhism – that's an instance of misunderstanding what religion is and what science is and the relationship between religion and science.' This demonstrates a certain level of intellectual humility in *Why I Am Not a Buddhist*. Amidst the strong claims and unambivalent critique, the work appears to be motivated by a recognition that at points in his own work, surrounding the publication of the *Embodied Mind*, and since, he has himself been guilty of conceiving Buddhism in a Buddhist Modernist way. In this way he has unwittingly promulgated what he now conceives to be a problematic form of 'Buddhist exceptionalism'. As he states in an interview with Lion's Roar 'I very much believed that Buddhism was either not a religion or it had elements that are scientific – in that they could be extracted out of the context of being a religion to be brought into engagement with science' (December 31, 2020). As shall become evident below, the exceptionalist approach goes far beyond the claim that the Buddhist tradition offers valuable philosophical contributions, or that it may be brought into a rich exchange. The difference may appear subtle, but it is important.

Thompson's Case Against Buddhist Exceptionalism

Buddhist Modernism, the prevalent and widely adopted conception of Buddhism in the west today, is the target of Thompson's critique. Buddhist Modernism is the term used to describe a contemporary form of Buddhism that arose in 19th century Asia in response to European colonialism, which resulted in the re-casting of Buddhism in ways that presented it as both modern and scientific. Such a characterisation was well motivated as it helped Buddhism

resist colonising powers. This form of Buddhism was consequently exported to the West, and it is this modified form of Buddhism as a scientific, empirical and rationalist path that we encounter in the West today. Modern-day proponents of Buddhist Modernism claim to retain the 'essential core' of Buddhist teachings, yet in reality, Thompson suggests, they are offering a deeply selective and biased model, that will usually emphasise meditative experience paired with scientific empiricism and rationality, while jettisoning the unpalatable metaphysical and ritualistic aspects of culturally diverse forms of Buddhism.

Thompson's book offers criticisms of central positions within Buddhist Modernism, subjects we have taken up elsewhere also: whether it be the assumed parallel between the scientific notion of a constructed self and the Buddhist view of the illusory nature of self; the scientific 'proof' for the truth of Buddhism; the explicit identification of Buddhism as a 'science of the mind'; the scientistic reductionism inherent in the notion of what may be called 'neural' Buddhism – the idea that neuroscience shows the validity of Buddhist meditation and consequently Buddhist metaphysics by peeking inside the brain; the conceptually naive belief that meditative 'mindfulness' practice offers a direct and 'unmediated' experience of reality; and the problematics of side-stepping the question of enlightenment or the secularising the notion of nirvana for palatability (Tempone-Wiltshire, 2024a; 2024c; Thakchoe & Tempone-Wiltshire, 2019). For our purposes here, it is important to note that Thompson demonstrates that each of these concepts is more complex and contested within Buddhism than is widely acknowledges by Modernists.

Whilst Thompson's contributions on this score are thoughtfully articulated they are not always unique, and a number of his points are also addressed elsewhere, for instance the exploration of Buddhist Modernism in David McMahan's (2008) *The Making of Buddhist Modernism;* Ron Purser's (2019) socio-cultural critique of the 'McMindfulness' phenomena and the capitalist appropriation of Buddhist spirituality; and Ann Gleig's ethnographically-informed critique of the racialist process of acculturation in Buddhist Modernism in her 2019 text *American Dharma*. Thompson's work does, however, identify some of Buddhist Modernism's central limitations which have not received adequate attention; in particular, the notion of Buddhist 'exceptionalism'. Thompson utilises the term 'Buddhist exceptionalism' to express the idea that Buddhism is fundamentally, essentially, different from any other religion. This exceptionalism derives from the image of the Buddha – who is viewed as a 'rational free-thinking empiricist'. Buddhism is conceived by the exceptionalist as superior to other religious traditions in that it provides not a set of unjustifiable metaphysical assertions, but rather a scientific understanding of the mind's functioning: offering practices enabling us to experience the world as it *truly is*. on this view, unique amongst religions, Buddhism may be conceived

as a 'mind science' offering empirically derived insights, entirely consistent with emerging developments in neuroscience and cognitive psychology.

Thompson takes issue with Buddhist exceptionalism as a rhetorical tool for the Buddhist modernist apologist. He holds that setting Buddhism apart as a 'distinctly' scientific philosophy distorts Buddhism, science and religion. It is also, he argues, unnecessary. Yet he doesn't describe it as unnecessary in Gould's (1999) sense; that attempting to justify or validate spiritual beliefs with recourse to the sciences is redundant – religion and science being *non-overlapping magisteria.* Rather he claims we should step back from attempting to propagate or justify Buddhist practices through recourse to science, narrowly and materialistically conceived, as a knowledge powerhouse.

His critique of Buddhist Exceptionalism begins with a demonstration of how Buddhism is by no means as rational or secular as the Exceptionalist would have us believe. This is as: (a) Buddhism includes a community of 'believers' with a faith-based conviction in a transcendental source for the meaning of experience and reality. (b) Buddhism offers a soteriological project, that is, meditative practices and insights are utilised towards the goal of not only the relief of suffering, but ultimately, complete liberation from delusion. (c) While certain practices, mindfulness meditation for example, are today commonly understood to reveal the nature of the mind, Thompson points out they are rather 'practices that shapes the mind according to certain goals and norms' (2020, 32), a subject we articulate further in relation to Mindfulness, Trauma and the Buddhist Theory of No-Self (Tempone-Wiltshire & Dowie., 2024a). In brief: Buddhism inescapably involves a religious understanding of how to find meaning and a soteriological endeavour to liberate oneself from suffering. Thompson rightly demonstrates that to carve off these dimensions of Buddhism is to distort Buddhism.

A Personal Anecdote

To more fully convey Thompson's project, I'll offer an anecdote from my own experience. As a contemplative practitioner and senior lecturer in philosophy and psychology, I have attended and presented at the Mind and Life Summer Research Institute – an Institute founded in part by Thompson himself – and participated in the Buddhist modernist process in its unfurling. I have similarly presented as a speaker at the global Buddhist conference in Berkeley, San Francisco and elsewhere. At such events I felt myself to be participating in a current where Buddhist exceptionalism and Buddhist modernism, were not so much abstract theories as felt tides. For instance, in casual discussions it was common to encounter individuals tacitly defending the claim that "Buddhism isn't really a religion, it's a mind science" or asserting in various ways that "Buddhism is different from other kinds of religions because it's not about

belief, but about direct experience." What Thompson demonstrates is that, from a scholarly perspective, Buddhism is undeniably a religion; driven by central concepts of liberation and salvation via realization and awakening, structured in terms of the idea of existence as suffering, impermanence and no-self, each of which, he suggests, is fundamentally a religious notion.

The discourse at such events is characterised by conceptual transitions that are too quick and too easy. For example, between a Buddhist philosophical conception of the false or illusory nature of *self* and the cognitive scientists' understanding of the 'constructed' self, as Thompson describes it as a '[…] developmental and social construction [...] not existing apart from experience' (2020, 108). These are two profoundly distinct claims: one, a scientific redescription of what it *is* to be a self, albeit a constructed self – and the other, an ethical value the Buddhist operates from according to which the sense of being an independent self is a problematic illusion to be abandoned in order to attain liberation from suffering.

In general, the 'dialogue' that takes place at such events can commonly be understood more as an attempt to scientifically *demonstrate* that Buddhist practice grants the practitioner greater access to 'ultimate truth'. This diverges radically from the more common sense understanding of 'dialogue', on which Buddhism offers one of many perspectives that should be part of a conversation between diverse disciplinary knowledges and cultural sets of beliefs.

It is worth asking, as Thompson's essay tacitly asks, what a dialogue would look like if it *weren't* characterised by attempts to use science to legitimate Buddhism. It was such an emerging discomfort with the evolution taking place within the science-Buddhism dialogue, particularly in the context of The Mind and Life Institute, that prompted Thompson's latest project. A critique you could say of ideology leading science: that is, attempts by Buddhist enthusiasts to use science to justify Buddhism. As Thompson puts it in an interview with Lion's Roar: "I started to read more about the history of Buddhism, and I realized that what we were doing was the latest chapter of something that had begun in the 19th century, and that it was actually very problematic precisely because of the misrepresentations of science and religion and Buddhist Exceptionalism" (December 31, 2020).

Celebrity meets Philosophy

It must be said that Thompson's critique is timely: recent years have seen a burgeoning number of texts extolling the 'scientifically demonstrated' benefits of mindfulness in application to any and everything – ranging from sex and eating to business, workplace productivity and self-understanding – for further see *Mind the Hype*, by Van Dam *et al* (2018). Thompson rightly points out that the currents of discourse are emerging too rapidly and uncritically. The world

is now rife with conferences, courses and celebrity personalities promoting the notion that Buddhism is a unique spiritual exception, which unlike other faiths can be readily made secular, rational and profoundly compatible with cutting-edge science, indeed that Buddhism constitutes a well-formed 'science of the mind' that may be adopted wholesale to the profitable transformation of western culture. It should be no surprise that in one of the few reviews available of Thompson's latest work, *Kirkus* describes the book as offering "the forceful, if laboured, argument Western Buddhists need to hear."

It is for this reason that the work is notable, too, for the opponents to which it addresses itself: that is, intriguingly, Thompson turns his critiques not against scholars at a remove from society, but rather against those popularisers of Buddhist modernism in the mainstream: whether it be figures like Robert Wright and the text *Why Buddhism is True* (2017), or Sam Harris in his *Waking up: A guide to spirituality without religion* (2014), and his *waking up* podcast, Stephen Batchelor's (2015; 2017) attempts to secularise Buddhism, or Joseph Goldstein's *Practical Guide to Awakening* (2013). What is evident is that celebrity popularists who advertise their secular and scientific credentials, are garnering attention in a way genuine philosophers of science like Thompson never will. More is the pity, you might say. Thompson takes another tack: rather than leave the popularisers of Buddhist modernism to their own devices, Thompson takes them as his primary interlocutors and opponents for the trenchant and piercing criticisms he offers in this book. Indeed, in this work Thompson can be seen to be engaging in, perhaps more than ever, an emergent contemporary 'public' Buddhism.

This speaks to what Thompson finds most objectionable: the false or easy juxtaposition of select readings of contemporary science and select aspects of Buddhist philosophy. To give some key examples, Thompson critiques the secularist approach of Stephen Batchelor, and how by drawing upon a tendentious and selective interpretation of certain texts within the Pali Cannon, Batchelor reconstructs Buddhist philosophy to offer a more *palatable* version for a secular western consumption. On the science end, he offers a poignant critique of Robert Wright's *Why Buddhism is True,* questioning Wright's treatment of highly disputed and philosophically tendentious evolutionary theories as undeniable *fact* to validate Buddhist metaphysical claims. Similarly, he challenges the likes of Sam Harris, by unpacking how the mindfulness craze is founded upon at best tentative, merely suggestive scientific evidence, and fails to account for the fact that the benefits of mindfulness practice have been shown to be inseparable from the social and communal settings in which mindfulness takes place. A subject I have also recently tackled clinically, in relation to the recent popular science of mindfulness, embodiment and trauma treatment (Tempone-Wiltshire (2024c). These are only some demonstrable examples.

The unfortunate reality is that however well-informed, precise and technically rigorous Thompson's critique proves to be, he is unlikely to receive the wide readership of popular writers such as Wright, Harris, or Batchelor. These figures have the advantage of improved accessibility, they are more engaging in that they do not require the reader to think particularly hard. Moreover, the view they proffer – of a metaphysic, a set of spiritual practices, a soteriology and a value-system eminently compatible with science – is one in which the seeker of meaning, in the vacuum of contemporary culture, will find deep solace and purpose. It is hard today to assert one's religiosity without appearing to be gullible and anti-scientific, hence the temptation to Buddhist modernism. Yet as Thompson demonstrates, the failings of criticality in the rush to synthesise, justify and validate one's belief systems, is the danger of credulity and dogmatism. If there is one thing today's politically polarised and ideologically divisive culture needs it is reflexive awareness, careful thought and scrutiny. Thompson's *Why I Am Not a Buddhist* offers such an invitation.

Shortcomings of the Text

Why I Am Not a Buddhist might foremost be considered a careful reflection upon the science–Buddhism dialogue in which Thompson has long been a major participant. In this book Thompson shares the result of those reflections, and raises criticisms intended to be friendly towards Buddhism, motivated by a belief that Buddhism is a fundamentally important human tradition and believing that, as such, the conversation ought be carried out reflectively, in a manner responsive to critique. There is no doubt Thompson is earnest in this attempt; nonetheless there are certain areas which his own work may have profited from a fuller exploration. In particular there remain contextualising questions that might leave one feeling more charitably inclined towards the Buddhist exceptionalist and their endeavours.

That is to say, Buddhist Modernist assertions – *Buddhism isn't religious*, or that *it's spiritual-but-not-religious*, or that *it can be justified by science* – such claims are rhetorical tools that should indeed be examined closely for the danger of hype misleading the readership. However, Thompson raises additional concerns that require unpacking. For instance he writes that meditative introspection is prone to fallibilities which may skew the findings of meditative practice. Yet we might ask, is this not also of course true of the introspective faculties drawn upon by the materialistic scientist in their interpretation of empirical data? One of the few citations of Thompson's work demonstrates just such a challenge. Realpe-Gomez (2020) makes the case for adopting a *relational* view when observing what it is that 'scientists doing science' are doing. Through a reverse-engineering of the practice of 'doing science' Realpe-Gomez attends to certain 'non-spurious' aspects of experience that inevitably remain – including the fact that

embodiment, and the necessity to observe from a specific perspective, is unavoidable. This relational view could be summed up as: every experience has a physical correlate, and every physical phenomenon is an experience *for* someone. In which case critiques of introspection certainly appear to generalise to *all* of science, to some degree at least. So, the questions must be addressed: is Thompson not tacitly reifying the material dimension as less informed by bias than the experiential? It may be that Thompson would accept that the culture of science itself carries its own aspects of *collective social construction*, of bias and dogma, indeed of soteriology. Further attention ought be given to evaluating, if so, whether a meaningful demarcation can be made between third person, and first person, science. Of course, variants of this argument have been made to challenge the purported unity of science, both methodologically (Dupre, 1993) and metaphysically (Cartwright, 1999).

Furthermore, Thompson's work would have benefitted from an evaluation of the key epistemological obstacles raised against mindfulness as a technique for gaining insight into consciousness, as this is a central subject in exploring the relationship between science and Buddhism. It remains to be seen whether the standard critiques of introspective techniques all apply to Mindfulness. For instance, more could be said by Thompson in relation to the claims that: our experience of ourselves is as opaque as our experience of external objects; in which case a meditator's experience is a deceptive guide to truth; we construct ourselves and our awareness; this construction is conceptual and happens mainly through introspection; and consciousness is a hidden phenomenon known only by inference, which is an imperfect process (2018, 170). Very little is said by Thompson, surprisingly, in relation to classic challenges raised against introspection and their application to meditative practice. This includes challenges such as: the Limited Scope of Insight, the Subject-Object Split, the Excavation problem, the Impossibility of Research into Everyday Experience and the Issue of Horizon (Garfield, 2014). Yet an assessment of meditative introspection's capacity to deliver veridical insights would have major ramifications for the value of meditative practice in both psychotherapeutic settings and cognitive scientific research.

Indeed, a related important area unaddressed by Thompson concerns the overlapping domain of Buddhist modernism with the transpersonal psychology movement in the western clinical sphere. This is particularly pertinent in light of the rising attention to non-ordinary states induced both through eastern contemplative practices such as meditation, and psychedelic or entheogenic substance use; a subject for therapeutic practice we articulate in greater depth elsewhere (Tempone-Wiltshire & Dowie, 2023c; Tempone-Wiltshire & Matthews, 2023), this includes questions being raised concerning the epistemic implications of meditative and psychedelic experience, and interrelating

notions concerning the nature of nonduality (Tempone-Wiltshire & Matthews, 2023)

Such an assessment of the nature of mindfulness, introspection and non-conceptual content has much to offer to the Buddhism–Science dialogue. More generally, this subject has implications for the prospect of establishing a cross-cultural cognitive science, and indeed for establishing the value of first-person phenomenology in scientific research. This too, raises important questions: to what extend do Thompson's critiques generalise? That is, if the characterisation of Buddhism as 'mind science' is problematic on account of a critique of the coherence of the notion of first-person science then doesn't this have major implications for the field of embodied cognition and phenomenology's application in the cognitive sciences? Further, if characterisation of Buddhism as a 'mind science' is problematic on account of its normative dimension, should the same critique not be applied to the entire realm of the social sciences and those disciplines which inevitably are informed by human biases, discourse and convention? Thompson's scope in *Why I am Not a Buddhist* is laudable, and yet such questions require further address. The conventions of labelling one thing science and another not science, as it relates to culture more broadly, is a subject that warrants greater reflection. A further area worthy of consideration in the Buddhist-science dialogue is the evident value accrued in defending the merits of a field of knowledge by allying it to the discourse of science and empiricism, in an age of scientism (Hammerstrom, 2016).

Why Evan Thompson Really is no Buddhist: the Four Seals

While Thompson provides a fascinating exploration across a wide field of subjects relating to the Buddhism–Science Dialogue one area of interest concerns what we might term the 'real' reason Thompson is not a Buddhist. Thompson's latest book isn't really about what it says it's about. It is a book about conceptual confusion and the need for clarification. It is a book about the power of discourse, the dangers of dogma and the need to check the influence of the popularisers of sloppy ideas. It is about Buddhism being given carte-blanche exceptionalist treatment, and about how this aspect of the contemporary formation of Buddhist practice is sweeping the western world. What it is not about is why Thompson, personally, *is not a Buddhist*.

So: why is Thompson no Buddhist? Firstly, Thompson claims in his text, that one is presented with only two options if he wishes to be a Buddhist: (a) join a traditional Buddhist community, such as the Thai, Tibetan, Burmese; or (b) become a Buddhist modernist. He claims that (a) is not possible for him, as he dislikes aspects of traditional sects – for instance the patriarchal character, Buddhist guru scandals etcetera, and (b) is not possible, as he doesn't like Buddhist modernism. He then dedicates the majority of his text to providing a

critique of Buddhist modernism. If we take Thompson at his word, according to which these are the options set out for one wishing to call himself a Buddhist, then we have a clear understanding of why he is not a Buddhist.

However, these are not the only options for being a Buddhist – you don't have to be a card-carrying member of a religious sect to call yourself a Buddhist. You don't even have to call yourself a Buddhist to more or less be a Buddhist – i.e., it is still occasionally appealing to claim that no real Buddhist would call himself a Buddhist, as to do so would be a symptom of reification, of self-image conceit, or a failing to embody the teachings on emptiness by trying to 'make a thing' out of yourself. Furthermore, it is important to note that Thompsons contention that one must be either a Buddhist modernist as he describes it or a traditionalist, appears to be something of a false dichotomy. As has been noted, there exist a range of forms of Buddhism that have evolved, and continue to evolve, in the inevitable acculturation process; not all these varieties are wedded to any particular Buddhism and Science interface, in the manner of which Thompson is critical.

The real reason that Thompson gives for not being a Buddhist, in interview beyond the pages of his text, is in fact, at root, that he doesn't accept *the four seals*. These are the Tibetan Buddhist framing, in which to be a Buddhist is to accept the four propositions of: no-self, impermanence, that all conditioned things are tainted, and that nirvana is liberation. In particular, he rejects the seal that 'all conditioned phenomena are tainted'. The notion that all conditioned phenomena are tainted, or fundamentally unsatisfactory, is to be set against nirvana. He notes in *Lion's Roar*:

> You could say that [all conditioned phenomena are tainted] is a core, structural idea of Buddhism. As a philosopher, it's not an idea that I subscribe to. I have profound respect for the idea. I think it's an expression of a very deep human realization. But I don't subscribe to it because my worldview is one in which conditioned and impermanent things are part of the nature of the cosmos. They're not inherently contaminated or tainted or unsatisfactory. They can be occasions of suffering, but they can also be occasions of other things. So, if we wanted to go to the core of why I'm not a Buddhist, speaking philosophically about the central commitments of Buddhism – not just Buddhist modernism – that would be why I'm not a Buddhist. (December 31, 2020).

According to Buddhist doctrine, all phenomena are conditioned phenomena as they arise due to causes and conditions. Consequently, existence is marked by three characteristics: impermanence (*anicca*), suffering (*dukkha*), and non-self (*anattā*). To refer to conditioned phenomena as tainted is to suggest that they are not a safe refuge; we cannot take refuge in what is conditioned. It is *avidyā*,

ignorance of this fact, that leads one to cling to conditioned phenomena as permanent when they are ultimately impermanent, subject to *anicca,* arising and passing away. *Dukkha* – suffering, struggle and reactivity – results from mistaking conditioned phenomena for the unconditioned. This constitutes a form of reification or denial of anatta, nonself and the inherent emptiness of conditioned phenomena. Grasping onto conditioned phenomena naturally leads to suffering as they are not able to provide lasting happiness as they are ultimately insubstantial, devoid of self-nature. Ignorance as to the tainted nature of conditioned phenomena leads to clinging w which generates and perpetuates the cycle of saṃsāra. The goal of Buddhist practice is indeed to recognize the tainted nature of conditioned phenomena and to break the cycle. Thompson's rejection of this tenant of Buddhism is indeed the main reason most people are not Buddhist's, yet he provides no argumentation in his text that would constitute a valid justification for his position. As Thompson writes:

> my worldview is one in which conditioned and impermanent things are part of the nature of the cosmos. They're not inherently contaminated or tainted or unsatisfactory.

Thomson offers no reason for the rejection of this central tenet of Buddhist thought, and so his position ultimately, unfortunately, feels inadequately articulated. It is the true fulcrum on which his argument hinges and yet he gives no satisfactory argumentation against the notion of the tainted nature of conditioned phenomena.

According to our sympathetic reading, Thompson may be articulating a critique of certain transcendentalists aspects common to particular Buddhist sects which, can participate in a life-negating venture based upon a particular nihilistic rendering of what it means for conditioned phenomena to be 'tainted'. Yet, as we articulate elsewhere, the tainted nature of conditioned phenomena may, rather, be indicative of a migration from a substance-based ontology to a process-view of reality; one in which beyond the illusion of a separate atomised world of discrete objects there exists an intricate interpenetrating perfection in a constant state of generative becoming; one which in no way ascribes unsatisfactoriness to existence. We articulate such a process psychology and metaphysics in relation to Buddhism, Indigenous Psychology and Western philosophy in related works (Dowie & Tempone-Wiltshire, 2022; 2023; Tempone-Wiltshire., 2024b; Tempone-Wiltshire & Dowie, 2023a; 2023b).

Perhaps Thompson is wise to not attempt a larger critique of the four seals; given the scope of his work, as indeed, we must leave analysis of this larger question of Buddhist soteriology for another time. It is nonetheless important to note that Thompson's critique of Buddhist modernism raises a distinct set of questions from his critique of Buddhist soteriology. And while he raises some valuable areas of concern in regard to the modern Western uptake of Buddhism

and certain facets of its intermingling with science—his text in no way articulates an argument for rejecting Buddhism as a philosophy or wisdom tradition in its own right. It is also important to note that displacing Buddhism as a philosophy or psychological tradition is nowhere in the text Thompson's intention.

Conclusion

To reiterate then, Thompson believes himself to be no enemy of Buddhism: indeed, Thompson holds Buddhist insights into human experience to be exceptionally valuable, offering, for one, a 'radical critique of our narcissistic preoccupation with the self' (2020, 189). Yet while Thompson asserts that in offering this critique, he wishes to be a 'good friend to Buddhism' there are likely many self-identified Buddhists that, in reading his trenchant critiques, may find a valuable if combative companion in this author. Thompson's critique of the superiority and sanctimony conveyed in an Exceptionalist attitude, characterised by viewing Buddhism as the 'true' path, offers a valuable and rarely spoken challenge. The desire implicit in this book is to – however unpopular with the true believer – clarify a relationship to Buddhism both philosophically and personally. This desire is valuable and to be lauded, as it is one which every contemplative practitioner ought to attempt to clarify for their personal understanding. The cogency of his arguments should offer those sympathetic to Buddhist modernism reason to pause in their tracks and assess their foundations. After all, should Buddhism live up to the rational, analytic reputation it has amassed, its propagators should embody such virtues, and attend critically to the cultural currents of which they are a part. Thompson's challenge may be described thus: can Buddhism in the modern world go beyond *Buddhist modernism*? And what would that mean? In a world characterised by neuro-hype; eastern-fetishization and the secular-colonisation of ancient traditions – this intellectually ambitious and provocative work is essential reading for anyone interested in Buddhism's place in today's world.

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