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University of Calgary (March 29, 2019)

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Naturalizing Buddhism: Tradition and Tension

A Reflection on Bernard Faure's Leslie S. Kawamura Memorial Lecture at the University of Calgary (March 29, 2019)

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On March 29th, 2019, The Numata Chair in Buddhist Studies at the University of Calgary hosted the Annual Leslie S. Kawamura Memorial Lecture titled "Beyond the Hype: Buddhism at the Risk of Neuroscience" by Bernard Faure, the Kao Professor in Buddhism at Columbia University. Faure discussed the growing dialogue between Buddhism and neuroscience, with critical attention towards the process of "naturalizing Buddhism."

Faure prefaced his lecture by noting "four caveats" that should caution the study of Buddhism and neuroscience. Firstly, Faure explained that Buddhism, as a diverse and varying array of traditions, should be more accurately labeled "Buddhisms." Here, Faure argued that without recognizing the diversity of Buddhist traditions, the neuroscientific study of Buddhism risks overgeneralization.

Secondly, while impressed by its technology, Faure expressed hesitancy towards the conclusions reached by neuroscientific methods

such as electroencephalogram (EEG) and functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI). Faure argued that the “neuroscientific paradigm is not the same as the Buddhist paradigm,” as neuroscientific studies do not have access to the *qualia*— the subjective experience of the practitioner.

Thirdly, Faure identified the merging of Buddhism with modern technology. Here, he cited Mindfulness-based Stress Reduction (MBSR). Faure cautioned that this merging results in “Neo-Buddhism” that is largely blind to “non-Western, traditional elements of Buddhism.”

Expanding on his third caveat, Faure’s fourth and final caveat focused on the contemporary explosion of mindfulness technologies. Noting that there are innumerable mindfulness apps, Faure argued that mindfulness has all but lost its clinical and soteriological value, becoming a “mindless” consumer product.

After articulating his four caveats, Faure turned to the problem of “naturalizing” Buddhism. Faure noted that “naturalism” is characterized by entirely natural and scientific processes, excluding the metaphysical realm. Thus, Faure argued, in order to naturalize Buddhism, one unavoidably comes into tension with Buddhist tenets such as the Four Noble Truths, karma, and cosmology. Faure cited “eliminativism” as a result of this tension. He noted the Dalai Lama’s famous call to abandon tenets of Buddhism proven untrue by science. However, according to Faure, the Dalai Lama thereby commits a “category mistake,” as the world housing Buddhist cosmology is not the naturalistic world of science, but rather “a world ruled by the law of karma—a law that the Dalai Lama himself is reluctant to discard.” Faure concluded this point by playfully analogizing Buddhism to the human brain. While Buddhism, like the brain, contains a considerable amount of plasticity, one cannot remove too many pieces without creating a major malfunction and inducing a comatose state.

Next, Faure turned to Buddhist mythology, asking the question: Is it problematic for Buddhism to dispense with its cosmology, is it similarly problematic to dispense with its mythology? As with cosmology, Faure argues that getting rid of Buddhist mythology is problematic. Citing the Buddha's life as a template for greater Buddhist practice, Faure argued that once one removes the mythological elements from the story of the Buddha, they "are left with a perfectly uninspiring biography."

Returning to neuroscience, Faure discussed what he labeled "the blind-spot in the neuroscientific discussion of Buddhist consciousness—enlightenment." Simply put: Without enlightenment, there is no Buddha, and without the Buddha, there is no Buddhism. Faure explained that according to Buddhists such as the Dalai Lama, enlightenment has "no neural correlates." In other words, if neuroscientific methods seek to observe soteriological activity, they are barking up the wrong tree. Faure described this as a "conversation-breaker for neuroscientists," who cannot possibly measure what Buddhists label "ineffable."

Reflecting on his critical assessment of neuroscience and the naturalization of Buddhism, Faure called for a slowing of Buddhist homogenization. In contrast to the convergence and reduction of Buddhist thought via naturalization, Faure argued for the re-valuing of divergence in Buddhist thought. This entails a recognition of "Buddhisms" rather than a Buddhism. Where naturalization encourages the elimination of Buddhist tenets that do not square with science, Faure instead argued that the entities of Buddhism and science should be positioned at a distance. Without this distance, Faure concluded, Buddhism "utterly naturalized and unidimensional, will become devoid of purpose—lifeless. Naturalizing our minds will mean that we have become (or perhaps always have been) cyborgs or zombies."