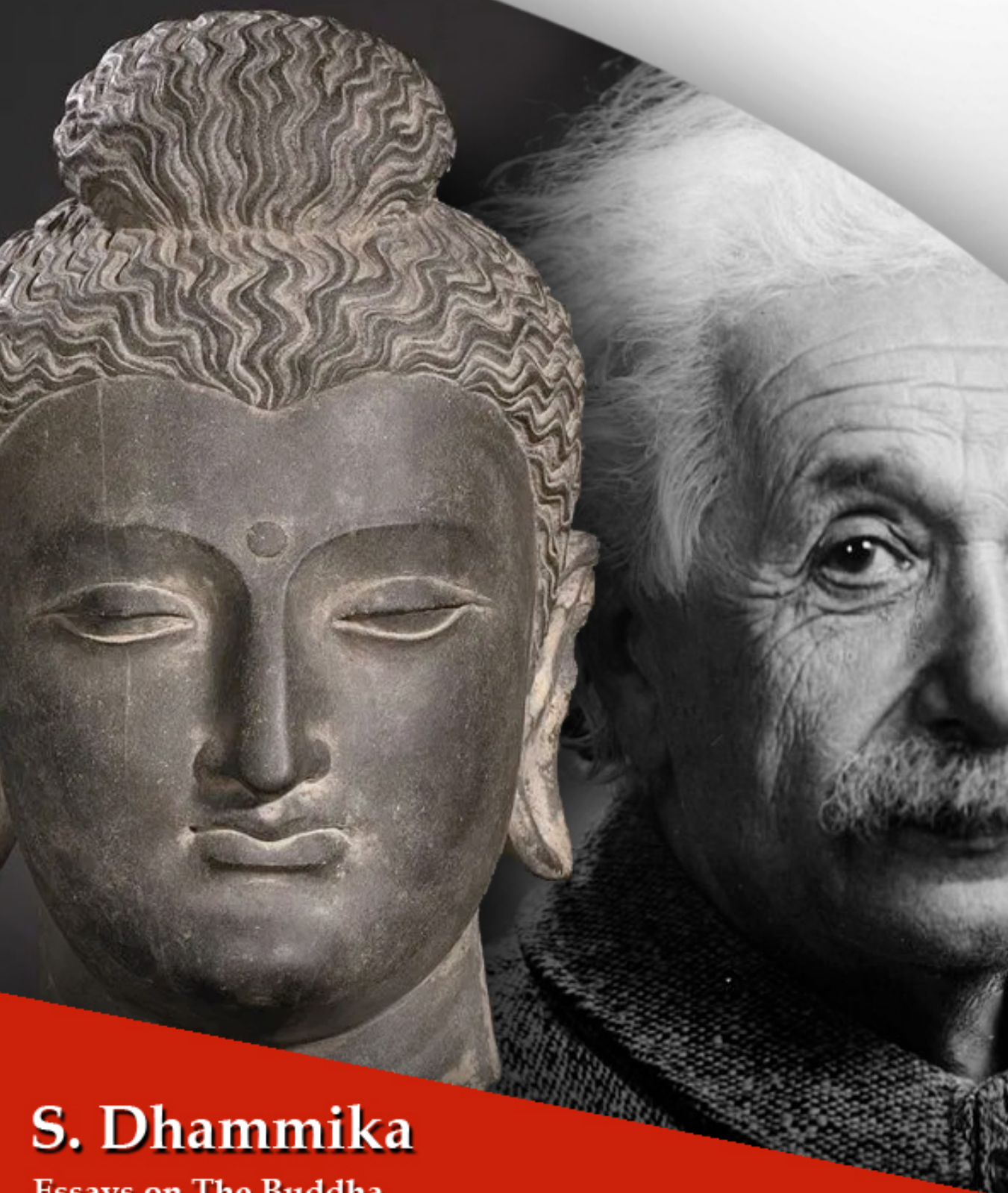


The Buddha, Einstein & Fake News



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Essays on The Buddha

The Buddha, Einstein and 'Fake News'

The other day someone passed me a book called '*Einstein and the Buddha: Parallel Sayings*' by Thomas J. Farlane. "Now that might be an interesting read" I thought to myself. If ever you need to be reminded of the truth of that old saying "You can't judge a book by its cover" read this little publication. Out of 125 quotations only 18 are attributed to the Buddha and of these only one is from the *Dhammapada* while all the rest are from Dwight Goddard's '*A Buddhist Bible*'. Now you may know that Goddard's book, first published in 1932, would have to be the most unreliable rendering of Mahayana sutras ever to see the light of day. Goddard was a Christian missionary in China, he knew no Sanskrit and where there was something which didn't fit into what he thought the Buddha **should** have taught he just changed it accordingly. Even poor old Einstein hardly gets a hearing in Farlane's book, despite the title there are only 25 quotes from him. The rest are from Taoist texts, Vedantic scriptures, Sri Aurobindo and some people I have never heard of; Godjin M. Nagao, Jagadish Chandra Chatterji, Cheng Chien, etc. As is often the case nowadays with westerners who write about Buddhism, Farlane uses 'Buddha' as a general catch-all phrase for any vague, feel-good or 'deep' spirituality that the author happens to like.

Another problem this book is that some of the sayings Farlane sees as being parallel do not correlate at all. For example, one quotation by physicist David Bohm says: "Matter is like a small ripple on this tremendous ocean of energy, having some relative stability and being manifest... And in fact beyond that ocean may be still a bigger ocean... the ultimate source is immeasurable and cannot be captured within our knowledge." The supposed parallel saying by the Buddha is: "Universal Mind is like a great ocean, its surface is ruffled by waves and surges but its depths remain forever unmoved." Now I may be wrong but it seems to me that the first quote is talking about matter while the second is referring to the mind. The first is positing unknowability while the second is asserting psychological immovability. In fact, the only thing these quotes seem to have in common is the mention of the ocean. Many of the other supposedly 'parallel' sayings in this book are just as tenuous.

Einstein and the Buddha is, sad to say, a good example of the sort of thing one often sees today. The Buddha continues to get co-opted by those who wish to use him to support whatever they happen to believe in. The mechanism of this co-opting goes something like this. Don't bother to check original Buddhist sources containing the Buddha's words, just cull odd quotes from secondary sources, some of which may or may not be genuine. Where there is no authentic saying to support your beliefs simply create one, and where there is one that contradicts what you believe either ignore it or claim that it was "put in later by the monks." And hey presto! The Buddha is anything you want him to be. Of course Jesus is subjected to this kind of slipshod treatment too but the wide availability of and knowledge about the Bible limits this to some extent. This is not the case with the Buddha. Authentic and complete translations of the Buddha's words have only lately become available and even now are not widely read.

However, putting Farlane's book aside, did Albert Einstein say anything that would be similar to what the Buddha taught or anything about Buddhism in general? Well, he occasionally expressed his ideas about religion. He described belief in God as "childish superstition" in a letter that was recently sold at auction. The father of relativity, whose previously known views on religion have been more ambivalent and fuelled much discussion, made the comments in answer to a philosopher in 1954. "The word 'God' is for me nothing more than the expression and product of human weaknesses, the Bible a collection of honourable, but still primitive legends which are nevertheless pretty childish. No interpretation no matter how subtle can (for me) change this." He said this in the letter written on January 3rd 1954 to the philosopher Eric Gutkind. The German-language letter was sold by Bloomsbury Auctions in London on the 17th April 2008 for £170,000 after being in a private collection for more than 50 years. Previously Einstein's comments on religion – such as "Science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind" – have been the subject of much debate and used notably to back up arguments in favour of the validity of religion. This letter reflected Einstein's real thoughts on the subject.

Okay! That's pretty clear. Now what did Einstein think of Buddhism? The two most often cited quotes on this subject from Einstein are these

- 1) "The individual feels the nothingness of human desires and aims and the sublimity and marvellous order which reveal themselves both in nature and in the world of thought. He looks upon individual existence as a sort of prison and wants to experience the universe as a single significant whole. The beginning of cosmic religious feeling already appears in early stages of development – e.g. in many of the Psalms of David and in some of the Prophets. Buddhism as we have learned it from the wonderful writings of Schopenhauer especially, contain much stronger elements of it."
- 2) "The religion of the future will be a cosmic religion. It should transcend a personal God and avoid dogma and theology. Covering both the natural and the spiritual, it should be based on a religious sense arising from the experience of all things, natural and spiritual in a meaningful unity. Buddhism answers this description. If there is any religion that would cope with modern scientific needs it would be Buddhism."

This first quote is certainly genuine. It was written by Einstein and originally published in the New York Times on November 3rd 1930. But I have always had my suspicions that this second quote is spurious and in an effort to establish its authenticity, I read the scholarly and authoritative 'Einstein on Religion' and also the Dover edition of 'Einstein and Cosmic Religion and Other Opinions and Aphorisms' and found that this quote is not found there. Further research has also drawn a blank. So for the time being we know a great deal of what Einstein thought of the belief in a supreme being, and we have some idea of what the great man thought about Buddhism. But he probably never said that Buddhism was "the religion of the future" or that "If there is any religion that would cope with modern scientific needs it would be Buddhism." It seems likely that this 'saying' is fake.