Introduction:

I am writing this in hope to encourage the reader to apply critical thinking to Buddhism and to demonstrate that the core of Buddhist teachings lies in its practice and that Buddhism shouldn’t be referred to as a religion but it is rather a set of teachings, which can be logically analyzed, scrutinized and found to have quite a rational foundation. Ideally this work will motivate people to start meditating instead of wasting time arguing about insignificant points in Buddhism which may even have been mere mistranslations or something of the sort.

It may seems as if there is a significant problem with applying critical thinking to Buddhism as a practitioner - it is an inevitable requirement to accept at least some dogmatism such as Buddha’s enlightenment, meditation as a way of achieving Enlightenment, the necessity of sila (moral or monastic regulations) and so on. If one was to undertake a Buddhist path while totally avoiding any dogmatism in any form and purely from a rational and critical point of view, it appears as if he would be unable to do so, since there are concepts in Buddhism that point to non-tangible non-verifiable (at least until enough insight has been developed) matters. We see more people turning to material science to answer the big question: “What is it all about?” instead of searching within oneself, as the Buddha taught. It is perhaps because most concepts in modern science refer to certain objects that are either calculable or tangible/visible or at least partly verifiable, which sound more satisfying to a layman, unlike the hypothetical bliss of jhanas or Nibbana, which may seem too distant or even out of reach. We do, however, encounter a lot of instances of critical thinking expressed by the followers of Buddhism that suggest that Buddhism has very little to do with blind faith and we could also use our own critical thinking in order to avoid dogmatic pitfalls or just see if the Buddha’s teachings make any sense at all:

“The Buddha said that those who simply believe others are not truly wise. A wise person practices until he is one with the Dhamma, until he can have confidence in himself, independent of others. On one occasion, while Venerable Sariputta was sitting, listening respectfully at the feet of the Buddha expounded the Dhamma, the Buddha turned to him and asked: “Sariputta, do you believe this teaching?” Venerable Sariputta replied, “No, I don’t yet believe it.”

Now this is a good illustration. Venerable Sariputta listened, and he took note. When he said he didn’t yet believe he wasn’t being careless, he was speaking the truth. He simply took note of that teaching, because he had not yet developed his own understanding of it, so he told the Buddha that he didn’t yet believe - because he really didn’t believe. These words almost sound as if Venerable Sariputta was being rude, but actually, he wasn’t. He spoke the truth, and the Buddha praised him for it.

“Good, good, Sariputta. A wise person doesn’t readily believe, he should consider first before believing.”

1 Ajahn Chah, http://www.dhammatalks.net/Books/Ajahn_Chah_Samma_Samadhi.htm - accessed on 20 June 2013
Needless to say that the word consider here points to the ability to analyze and come to a somewhat a logical conclusion. By looking at the examples like this in Buddhism, we can clearly see that it does not promote dogmatism and blind faith in any way but it rather does the opposite.

Another problem for a layman could be that there is some risk involved in undertaking the Buddhist path to awakening - it is the time and effort that one has to dedicate to practice, which may or may not be wasted. Obviously, so-called ultimate release, or the joy and happiness brought on by meditation is worth the effort, but as long as it is only hypothetical, to an individual it may seem like a very long shot. What Buddhism lacks perhaps, is tangibility, especially at the beginning of the path, where a student has to rely purely on faith, authority or suttas or at least it appears so. It is said that once a person experiences the first fruits of his jhanas (meditative absorptions), in form of bliss, his faith is undoubtedly going to transform into something more reliable and independent, thus providing zeal and in turn boost his practice.

If there is a blissful state such as jhāna and it is potentially achievable and verifiable, then perhaps it is very wise to try and see or find out for oneself, just as we try something new being motivated by someone’s advice, be it a delicious dish, a good movie or a good place to visit for vacation. There is certainly a risk of spending money, disappointment or regret, but yet people still do it, so why not follow the same logic and apply it in Buddhism, try and see so to speak. In the end, it may be very well worth the effort, while also proving that Buddhism is not so much of a religion as it is a set of teachings that train an individual for a particular goal, which is the cessation of suffering.

Simply studying suttas and thinking about them may provide some ideas, inspirations and food for thought but it will only remain hypothetical and may turn into an intellectual mess unless it is applied in practice through meditation. There are plenty of scholars and professors who spend their entire lives studying Buddhism, suttas and writing commentaries about their understanding without ever having sat on a meditation cushion. Zen Buddhism refers to that kind of people as ‘killers of Buddhism’ and there is an interesting saying in Zen tradition that the person who writes another book on Buddhism will be reborn as a donkey for seven lifetimes, obviously it is purely metaphorical, yet it is very easy to trace the subtle message this statement is trying to convey. I think it is a suitable place to quote Johann Wolfgang von Goethe here: “Knowing is not enough; you must apply. Willing is not enough; you must do.”

I believe this is the exact point where Buddhism differs from a lot of other traditions by being ultimately a practical approach. For instance, in contrast with Christianity, there is certainly a huge advantage in Buddhism, which seems to provide tangible results in this very life, rather than just feeding people with promises based on blind faith of hoping to see Jesus or His Father in a heaven after death. So if one had to make a rational choice whether to believe in Christ and live purely in hope and thus risk having lived all life in wishful thinking, or choose a very well detailed path of Buddhism, which provides results in this lifetime - it would probably be better to follow Buddhist Zen master Dogen’s way of thinking who was motivated to find the truth at all costs by believing that if there was heaven, it was possible to find it on earth and that it could be achieved here and now without having to believe in anything supernatural or wait till death to go to heaven.

It seems there are two main paths of modern Buddhist practice, which are said to lead one to the actual understanding of Buddhism rather than conceptualizing. The two are vipassana (insight meditation) and samatha (jhāna meditation). They are said to be essential in developing wisdom and insight, which are necessary for the attainment of the ultimate release and the experience of the Four Noble Truths, thus going beyond the necessity of faith and into the territory of confidence. Therefore, obviously the strongest
point of Buddhism is its clearly defined goal.

I would like to suggest that scientific evidence related to Buddhism could be of great benefit for a certain type of individuals - those who are highly intellectual and skeptical so that they could see for themselves the value of Buddha’s teachings and begin the purification path for which faith in the teachings is arguably necessary. I believe there is a great number of people who converted to Buddhism through studying comparative religion and other mystic traditions and by seeing a lot of similarities (i.e. samadhi, enlightenment, moksha, kensho, satori, dhyana, samadhi, and so on) and this conclusion is brought upon by thinking critically, scrutinizing and actually seeing those points being tightly connected, rather than relying on someone’s authority.

For a highly skeptical person it would be against his critical ability to deny the results of studies conducted on subjects in jhanas. We can clearly see that jhanas are something tangible, verifiable and attainable, thus dropping the need for faith or dogmatism as far as jhanas are concerned. A practitioner can be sure that jhanas are not something he needs to believe in, but that they are actually something scientific - achievable through samatha meditation practice. Perhaps this is where initial inspiration can be strongly established. There are plenty of disagreements whether one needs to pursue samatha first or one can start right from the practice of vipassana. To make things a bit clearer let me quote a portion of a page from one of the most respected Theravada Tradition’s Monk Ajarn Maha Boowa2:

“Samādhi does not bring about an end to all suffering; but samādhi does constitute an ideal platform from which to launch an all-out assault on the kilesas that cause all suffering. The profound calm and concentration generated by samādhi form an excellent basis for the development of wisdom.

Samādhi’s main function on the path of practice is to support and sustain the development of wisdom. It is well suited to this task because a mind that is calm and concentrated is fully satisfied, and does not seek external distractions. Thoughts about sights, sounds, tastes, smells, and tactile sensations no longer impinge upon an awareness that is firmly fixed in samādhi. Calm and concentration are the mind’s natural sustenance. Once it becomes satiated with its favorite nourishment, it does not wander off where it strays into idle thinking. It is now fully prepared to undertake the kind of purposeful thinking, investigation and reflection that constitute the practice of wisdom. If the mind has yet to settle down—if it still hankers after sense impressions, if it still wants to chase after thoughts and emotions—its investigations will never lead to true wisdom. They will lead only to discursive thought, guesswork and speculation—unfounded interpretations of reality based simply on what has been learned and remembered. Instead of leading to wisdom, and the cessation of suffering, such directionless thinking becomes samudaya—the primary cause of suffering.

Since its sharp, inward focus complements the investigative and contemplative work of wisdom so well, the Lord Buddha taught us to first develop samādhi. A mind that remains undistracted by peripheral thoughts and emotions is able to focus exclusively on whatever arises in its field of awareness and to investigate such phenomena in light of the truth without the interference of guesswork or speculation. This is an important principle. The investigation proceeds smoothly,

with fluency and skill. This is the nature of genuine wisdom: investigating, contemplating and understanding, but never being distracted or misled by conjecture.”

From the paragraph above, we can clearly see what purpose jhāna meditation serves; and, it is up to a person to decide whether to begin the path from vipassana or samatha meditation. It is also obvious that investigating and contemplating becomes a lot easier once the mind is in a state of samadhi as the biases are minimized and the ability to think critically and scrutinize experiences to their core is enhanced.

Another important point in Buddhism is self-analysis or self-scrutiny along the path, especially when a practitioner does not have constant contact with an Ajahn who knows. Of course self-scrutiny is nothing other than critical thinking applied through vipassana, which gradually develops through Buddhist practice until it transforms into prajna or wisdom.

Finally I would like to express my gratitude to Prof. Dion Peoples as impressions gained from his publications are incredibly positive. His work is clearly promoting healthy skepticism and teaches us how to apply our thinking ability to gain clarity in effort to understand Buddha’s teachings. Through developing our ability to think critically and applying it to the analysis of Buddha’s teachings we can perceive the depth of the teachings as well as absorb the essentials and consequently avoid unnecessary arguments and maximize the results. Thus we can see the utmost importance of critical thinking which is intrinsic part of Buddhist path; and without it, our efforts to perceive the core of Buddhist teachings may prove futile.
References:

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Ajahn Chah: http://www.dhammatalks.net/Books/Ajahn_Chah_Samma_Samadhi.htm
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