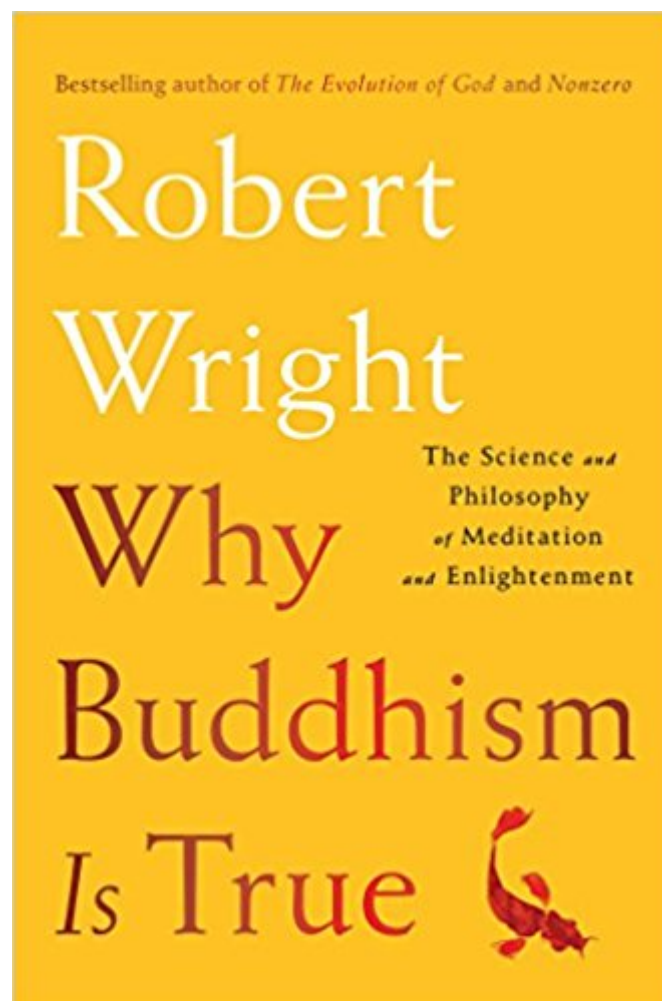




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# Why Buddhism Is True: The Science And Philosophy Of Meditation And Enlightenment



## Synopsis

New York Times Bestseller From one of America's greatest minds, a journey through psychology, philosophy, and lots of meditation to show how Buddhism holds the key to moral clarity and enduring happiness. Robert Wright famously explained in *The Moral Animal* how evolution shaped the human brain. The mind is designed to often delude us, he argued, about ourselves and about the world. And it is designed to make happiness hard to sustain. But if we know our minds are rigged for anxiety, depression, anger, and greed, what do we do? Wright locates the answer in Buddhism, which figured out thousands of years ago what scientists are only discovering now. Buddhism holds that human suffering is a result of not seeing the world clearly—and proposes that seeing the world more clearly, through meditation, will make us better, happier people. In *Why Buddhism is True*, Wright leads readers on a journey through psychology, philosophy, and a great many silent retreats to show how and why meditation can serve as the foundation for a spiritual life in a secular age. At once excitingly ambitious and wittily accessible, this is the first book to combine evolutionary psychology with cutting-edge neuroscience to defend the radical claims at the heart of Buddhist philosophy. With bracing honesty and fierce wisdom, it will persuade you not just that Buddhism is true—which is to say, a way out of our delusion—but that it can ultimately save us from ourselves, as individuals and as a species.

## Book Information

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“A sublime achievement.” —Adam Gopnik, *The New*

*Yorker* “Provocative, informative and... deeply rewarding.... I found myself not just

agreeing [with] but applauding the author. • The New York Times Book Review • “I have been waiting all my life for a readable, lucid explanation of Buddhism by a tough-minded, skeptical intellect. Here it is. This is a scientific and spiritual voyage unlike any I have taken before. • Martin Seligman, professor of psychology at the University of Pennsylvania and bestselling author of *Authentic Happiness* • “This is exactly the book that so many of us are looking for. Writing with his characteristic wit, brilliance, and tenderhearted skepticism, Robert Wright tells us everything we need to know about the science, practice, and power of Buddhism. • Susan Cain, bestselling author of *Quiet* • “Robert Wright brings his sharp wit and love of analysis to good purpose, making a compelling case for the nuts and bolts of how meditation actually works. This book will be useful for all of us, from experienced meditators to hardened skeptics who are wondering what all the fuss is about. • Sharon Salzberg, cofounder of the Insight Meditation Society and bestselling author of *Real Happiness* • “What happens when someone steeped in evolutionary psychology takes a cool look at Buddhism? If that person is, like Robert Wright, a gifted writer, the answer is this surprising, enjoyable, challenging, and potentially life-changing book. • Peter Singer, professor of philosophy at Princeton University and author of *Ethics in the Real World* • “Cool, rational, and dryly cynical, Robert Wright is an unlikely guide to the Dharma and the not-self. But in this extraordinary book, he makes a powerful case for a Buddhist way of life and a Buddhist view of the mind. With great clarity and wit, he brings together personal anecdotes with insights from evolutionary theory and cognitive science to defend an ancient yet radical world-view. This is a truly transformative work. • Paul Bloom, professor of psychology at Yale University and author of *Against Empathy: The Case for Rational Compassion* • “What a terrific book. The combination of evolutionary psychology, philosophy, astute readings of Buddhist tradition, and personal meditative experience is absolutely unique and clarifying. • Jonathan Gold, professor of religion at Princeton University and author of *Paving the Great Way: Vasubandhu’s Unifying Buddhist Philosophy* • “Joyful and insightful... both entertaining and informative. • Publishers Weekly (starred review) • “A light, accessible guide for anyone interested in the practical benefits of meditation. • Vox • “A well-organized, freshly conceived introduction to core concepts of Buddhist thought.... Wright lightens the trek through some challenging philosophical concepts with well-chosen anecdotes and a self-deprecating humor. • Kirkus Reviews • “Amusing and straight-forward.... Anyone... can safely dip their toes in the water here. • BookFilter • “Regardless of their own

religious or spiritual roots, many open-minded readers who accompany [Wright] on this journey will find themselves agreeing with him. • Shelf Awareness

Robert Wright is the New York Times bestselling author of *The Evolution of God* (a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize), *Nonzero*, *The Moral Animal*, *Three Scientists and their Gods* (a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award), and *Why Buddhism Is True*. He is the co-founder and editor-in-chief of the widely respected *Bloggingheads.tv* and has written for *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic*, *The New York Times*, *Time*, *Slate*, and *The New Republic*. He has taught at the University of Pennsylvania and at Princeton University, where he also created the popular online course “Buddhism and Modern Psychology.”

As Wright sees it, ‘The Truth’ of the human condition is to be found in natural selection, as described through evolutionary psychology in his early book *The Moral Animal: Why We Are, the Way We Are: The New Science of Evolutionary Psychology*. And he argues that this truth is uniquely addressed by ‘The Way’ of Buddhism, or at least naturalistic Buddhism. This ‘secular Buddhism’ is Buddhism without reincarnation, spirits or gods. Even the concept of complete or lasting enlightenment is held at arms length. Secular, naturalistic Buddhism rests on a few key ideas: the idea that people don’t have an essential ‘self’ (no-self), the idea that dissatisfaction (*dukkha*) is caused by the ‘hedonic treadmill’ of pursuit of pleasure and avoidance of pain, and that meditation can help us to get off this treadmill. The philosophical approach is similar to that of Stephen Batchelor in *A Confession of a Buddhist Atheist* and *Secular Buddhism: Imagining the Dharma in an Uncertain World*. There is a decidedly Gnostic bent to the writing here, right from the beginning, when the movie *The Matrix* is cited. Here natural selection is the process which holds us in a state of delusion, warps our perceptions of reality, prevents us from experiencing lasting contentment and satisfaction, and keeps us trapped on the hedonic treadmill. And secular-Buddhism is The Way (the ‘red pill’) that will liberate us from this endless drama of delusion and frustration. This view of evolution stands in marked contrast with that of Wright’s previous book, *The Evolution of God* (Back Bay Readers’ Pick), in which biological and cultural evolution are instead ‘divine’ processes by which the Good becomes manifest in the world. (The God-as-Evolution view is also that of the ‘Integral’ spirituality of Ken Wilber, Steve McIntosh, and others.) Part of this book is dedicated to showing that the key ideas of secular-Buddhism are scientifically true, through discussion of studies in psychology and neuroscience (an approach shared with *Waking Up: A Guide to Spirituality Without Religion*, by Sam Harris). This would be

more convincing if the studies were cited as a way of evaluating Buddhism against competing theories of well-being, such as modern positive psychology, but the book generally avoids this type of direct comparison. This is reflective of the basic approach of secular-Buddhism: the concepts which don't find support in scientific studies, such as reincarnation, or lasting enlightenment, are abandoned or de-emphasized. Secular-Buddhism is reformulating Buddhism to be more consistent with modern psychology, a dynamic which complicates the question of whether science can be used to show that 'Buddhism is True'. Wright expands on the concept of 'no-self' by presenting a 'modular' model of the mind. The idea is that our mind is composed of modules with different goals, desires, and thought patterns. The modules jostle and compete with each other on the subconscious level. Only when one of them carries a sufficiently strong feeling, do we then become aware of its associated thought on a conscious level. While Wright finds some support for this modular model from the Insight Meditation school, and from psychological research, he formulates it through his own preferred perspective of evolutionary psychology (Darwinian competition within the subconscious mind). Interestingly, the model is extended to suggest how mindfulness can improve our 'self'-control, and to weaken the pull of indulgent or addictive behavior. One of the pleasures of *The Evolution of God* was its detailed historical examples of the ways in which the 'spiritual marketplace' of competing ideas, and the needs of merchants, kings, and rulers all influenced the development of ancient Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Wright could have also taken this approach with Buddhism, exploring how its history as the state religion of multiple empires has shaped its development over time and place. I was hoping for this, and am disappointed not to find it here. However, Wright instead manages to tackle some pretty subtle philosophical issues, such as the distinction between the Buddhist concept of 'emptiness' (sunyata) and Hindu non-dualism, in a manner that is unusually accessible. He enlivens the discussion with narrative accounts of past conversations and interviews. This book is in many ways a personal account: Wright has found a version of secular-Buddhism that is True for him in his life, and he is bringing us along through his experience and thought process. Unlike many authors on Eastern spirituality, he is in no way trying to present himself as enlightened, or a spiritual teacher or guru. He is refreshingly unpretentious--humorously self-effacing, and transparent about his motivations for writing. And he is a clear writer--he does not try to intimidate us with obtuseness and paradox, even when addressing difficult concepts. The book is not always convincing, but it is engaging, approachable, and thought-provoking.

Like the author, I also went on a ten-day Vipassana meditation retreat nearly twelve years ago. I

had a similar experience. I did not last all ten days (I left after seven days - with permission from the teacher) because the commentary that accompanied the retreat was not satisfying the questions that were bubbling up in my mind. Since that time I have struggled to understand and articulate the central tenet of Buddhism - Emptiness. Like the author, I need explanations that are grounded in science and minimize jargon as much as possible. This book is a gift. (And I shall give this book as a gift to my friends and family.) If you are willing to learn and practice mindfulness meditation, reading this book may change your life. This is a tall claim - and I usually refrain from making big claims - but in this case I mean it. Wright uses his personal experience and his art of writing lucidly and eloquently (I also loved Wright's *The Moral Animal*) to assimilate wisdom from evolutionary biology and psychology to make this book full of insights and wisdom. A gem.

For those skeptical of supernatural claims and theistic versions of Buddhism, Robert Wright continues the quest that his earlier books such as *The Moral Animal* and *The Evolution of God* began. These titles hint at Wright's terrain, where fact and speculation, the tangible and the experiential, blur. He explores in *Why Buddhism Is True* the worldview that in the time of the historical Buddha, could not have been clearly expressed in pre-scientific, and very pre-Darwinian terms to human mindsets. Fresh from teaching courses on Buddhism and science at Princeton and similar courses at the Union Theological Seminary, Wright blends a wide-ranging series of investigations summed up from neural and biological research. His thesis proposes that the truth-claims of the dharma were a first, and correctly directed, step towards our own understanding of natural selection and the drives it creates. Born with them, we can free ourselves from them. Buddhism predicted the remedy for our human condition. For instance, what on the savannah might have kept us reproducing, in thrall to our communal band, and with sufficient resources to guard against hunger or competition now linger in us. They may be go under the names of lust, social fear of being shamed, avarice, gluttony and greed, but they convey the same "fetters" which Buddhist teaching encourages, and demands, we must overcome if we want to reach a more balanced and controlled mental and physical state, freed of the illusions of the senses. Around this central argument, Wright spins a lot of tales. A Foreigner song stuck in his mind, an annoying sitter near him on a meditation retreat, an urge to become easily irritated. He's been on the Buddhist path a while, but he rejects the trappings which have grown up around the teaching. He opts for a secular version, acknowledging that it may well be diluted (as is mindfulness or yoga) as it turns to the West, but he analyzes, in a final addendum, the core concepts that his book's laid out about establishing the veracity of what the Buddha and adepts since have incorporated into the

dharma. The tone is casual despite the heaps of learning stirred in. Wright writes again for a popular audience. Such interpretations possess value, for those of us less able or less leisured to delve into what the labs or monasteries for that matter might be generating as scholarship. However, the weight of so much data, dispersed over many chapters, sometimes slows the pace. Despite his genial tone, parts of this felt repetitious, belaboring the obvious once stated. Yet I find this same reaction to some treatments of Buddhism. A core teaching, a set of instructions can be summed up pithily, but like chess, for each pursuit the application approaches the infinite. This might convince, therefore, those already initiating some dharma practice for a while, While Wright introduces teaching, it's more its implementation. That leads him near the conclusion to some elevated claims. He endorses Daniel Ingram's promise that meditation results can be attained with diligence rapidly, and not just by those with decades of training. Wright like many admits that his transports have not occurred often, and when one did, he shows how ephemeral it was. He counsels daily discipline, more to calm and to establish more within one's reactive mechanism (not a term he uses) a longer-range, considered, and composed response to the triggers which, as with road rage, we inherit from billions of years of evolution, becoming an organism determined to gain ground, acquire loot, store up calories, and dominate by trophy wives. I expected the author to turn to a philosopher who also predicted ways in which we can comprehend our predicament, and who is seen in retrospect as sympathetic to Buddhism, Schopenhauer. In my e-galley, I did not find any mention of the World as Will and Representation that he conceived. It seems prescient here. There's discussion of contemporary thinkers, more from psychology than philosophy.. This book will create some debate, I predict, among the more traditional Buddhist practitioner; those open to his analytical, even detached attitude at times, and his production of a practical set of guidelines, may benefit from a presentation of the dharma seeking liberation not into a higher realm, but from the natural selection which tethers us to demands which prevent us from fully entering the state the Buddha modeled. Sure, as Wright concurs, sentience and cognition and evolution into our present status all have definite advantages. But as to drawbacks, he advises the dharma. Even if the science we now promote might in the future shift, the bedrock of the dharma, Wright avers, remains solid. Beholden as we'll be to our genetic inheritance, we can nurture by Buddhism our true nature. (P.S. I read this as an e-galley via Edelweiss)

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