



Beyond the Self: Conversations Between Buddhism and Neuroscience (MIT Press)

Matthieu Ricard , Wolf Singer

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Converging and diverging views on the mind, the self, consciousness, the unconscious, free will, perception, meditation, and other topics.

Buddhism shares with science the task of examining the mind empirically; it has pursued, for two millennia, direct investigation of the mind through penetrating introspection. Neuroscience, on the other hand, relies on third-person knowledge in the form of scientific observation. In this book, Matthieu Ricard, a Buddhist monk trained as a molecular biologist, and Wolf Singer, a distinguished neuroscientist—close friends, continuing an ongoing dialogue—offer their perspectives on the mind, the self, consciousness, the unconscious, free will, epistemology, meditation, and neuroplasticity.

Ricard and Singer's wide-ranging conversation stages an enlightening and engaging encounter between Buddhism's wealth of experiential findings and neuroscience's abundance of experimental results. They discuss, among many other things, the difference between rumination and meditation (rumination is the scourge of meditation, but psychotherapy depends on it); the distinction between pure awareness and its contents; the Buddhist idea (or lack of one) of the unconscious and neuroscience's precise criteria for conscious and unconscious processes; and the commonalities between cognitive behavioral therapy and meditation. Their views diverge (Ricard asserts that the third-person approach will never encounter consciousness as a primary experience) and converge (Singer points out that the neuroscientific understanding of perception as reconstruction is very like the Buddhist *all-discriminating* wisdom) but both keep their vision trained on understanding fundamental aspects of human life.

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From Reader Review *Beyond the Self: Conversations Between Buddhism and Neuroscience* (MIT Press) for online ebook

David Dinaburg says

The book looks bad. It exudes a self-help vibe. Its cover is not designed to draw the eye; not any eye I know, though perhaps someone, somewhere finds two seated upper torsos appealing. The title is boilerplate—in English translation, anyway—that churns into nothingness under the frothing weight of modern search engines. It avoids my subtitle pet peeve of pomposity by being incredibly blunt: Conversations between Buddhism and Neuroscience is exactly what you get. The entire book is constructed from dialogue, yet the density of text, not to mention the miniscule font, will crush any attempt to parse meaning if the reader isn't fully committed to engage.

This is not an end-of-the-day-commute-home read, or a weekend-indoors-when-videogames-exist type of book. It is a deliberate choose-to-wake-up-early-and-go-to-the-coffee-shop-for-an-hour-before-work commitment, and in that hour you might check your phone a dozen times or, if the stars align and your mind is ripe, you may immerse yourself in a dozen pages of a neuroscientist and a Buddhist monk talking to each other. Did I mention the monk has a PhD in molecular genetics? They are both very, very smart:

Matthieu Ricard: To come back to inner conflicts, they are mostly linked with excessive rumination on the past and anxious anticipation of the future, and thus they lead to being tormented by fear and hope.

Wolf Singer: I see it as an exaggeration of the otherwise well-adapted and necessary attempt to use past experience to predict the future, an attempt that is likely to not always converge toward a stable solution because the future is not foreseeable. Maybe it is the clinging to the fruitless search for the best possible solution—that is by definition impossible to find—that frustrates the system and causes uneasy feelings.

The whole experience of reading *Beyond the Self* felt a lot like running used to, or yoga does now; I got nervous before I actually started, but while I was doing it I was fully content.

I don't know how one would find this book—I can't remember why I picked it up—but it is a positive experience to read challenging material by thoughtful people. It defies summation or encapsulation in the way that lyrics without music seem silly unless you already know the beat. There is gentle repetition here, but the content isn't something I could pick up the first time and the overall pace proved to be quite slow—refreshment of the material was appreciated.

My major takeaway was the worthwhile practice of remembering the brain and the self are not static; no one is who they were before or who they will be in the future. The mind, like the body, requires continuous work to stay in the shape or form you want it to be in:

M: The crow often attack [the eagle], even though they are much smaller. They dive at the eagles from above trying to hit them with their beaks. However, instead of getting alarmed and moving around to avoid the crow, the eagle simply retracts one wing at the last moment, letting the diving crow pass by, and extends its wing back out. The whole thing requires minimal effort and is perfectly efficient. Being experienced in dealing with the sudden arising of emotions in the mind works in a similar way.

W: That reminds me of what we do when we encounter severe difficulties that require fast solutions, such as a complicated traffic situation. We immediately call on a large repertoire of escape strategies that we have learned and practiced, and then we choose among them without much reasoning, relying mainly on subconscious heuristics.

I very much appreciate this book and—awkward cover and bland title notwithstanding—wholeheartedly recommend everything about it. Carve yourself off a month or two and look into what it is that makes a mind a person.

Cynthia says

I am tempted to put this under "mysteries" in my shelves but decided on religious, which is even less correct. I didn't expect to be as fascinated by this book as I was. Recommend.

Zachary Flessert says

I was referred to this book from an excerpt in The Atlantic. It peaked my interest for a few reasons, the primary reason being that it is an academic conversation about the details of the agreements and disagreements between Buddhist and neuroscientific philosophies. It delves into both epistemology (considerably) and ontology.

It is a technical read that requires focus and endurance but it is immensely illuminating and humbling. Any ideas you have about free will and consciousness are going to be challenged, looked at, pieced apart, and rephrased and restated. The world is a lot more complicated than we think it is, and any assumptions we carry about free will or common sense are to be left at the door and never picked up again.

Recommended for Buddhists with scientific backgrounds, scientists interested in discourse about the nature of reality with non-scientists, and anyone who thinks they know a final answer on the nature of free will or consciousness. I recommend reading it in 5 sittings, corresponding to the 5 "essays". I recommend a pairing with The Mind Illuminated, which is a guide on meditation that incorporates and explains neuroscience and neuroscientific models of the mind and consciousness.

Marshall says

The book highlights the benefits of meditation and how developing a daily habit of meditating can improve our well being and experience of life. But it can be a much shorter book in my opinion

Natalie says

This is an intellectually satisfying book.

