

Book Review

Why Buddhism Is True

By Robert Wright

Simon & Schuster, 2017, \$17.00

Review by Zen Master Bon Hae (Judy Roitman)

In the beginning was—well, it's not clear when the beginning of the romance between Western notions of Eastern philosophy and Western notions of science began. By the 1970s *The Tao of Physics* and *The Dancing Wu Li Masters* were on bestseller lists; in the 1990s the focus shifted from physics to biology, most notably ecology, neuroscience and evolutionary psychology. Over the last three decades scores of papers, books, conferences and videos have appeared on these themes. (Note that these concerns are quite different from the seemingly similar and even more popular subject of how meditation affects the body, including and especially the brain.)

This only partially reciprocated Western romance with the East has generally taken the form of noting parallels between Buddhism and contemporary science. These parallels can strengthen into a philosophical preference: for example, it can be argued that the language of Nagarjuna and/or Dogen provides a better framework for modern science, from quantum physics to neuroscience, than the language of Aristotle and Descartes.

Into this ferment steps Robert Wright. He has a different agenda. He wants to use neuroscience and evolutionary psychology to show that the Buddhist analysis of how things work is, as the title says, true. This is not entirely a surprise—all of his five books invoke evolutionary psychology, which apparently imprinted itself on him indelibly when he was an undergraduate at Princeton. He is, to quote from George Johnson's 1988 review of Wright's book *Three Scientists and Their Gods: Looking for Meaning in an Age of Information*, "determined to make sense of it all." Which is both a virtue and the problem for this book. He is going to make sense of Buddhism, and he will do it through science, especially neuroscience and evolutionary psychology.

Wright is a serious practitioner of full-blown Vipassana, with a strong daily practice, who has sat a significant number of longish retreats. One of the pleasures of this book is the candor with which he talks about his own practice, and his encounters with his teachers—one of whom, when he tries to engage her in conversation as a source for this book, tells him that she is not interested in these issues; she is only interested in liberation. He does not take the hint.

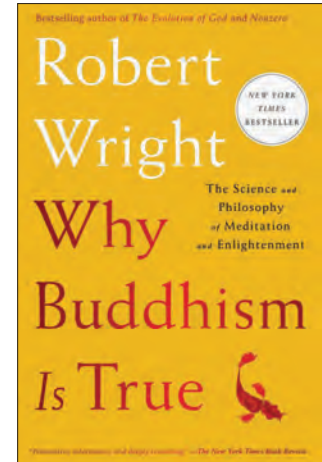
He is also a very smart guy, who has read and knows

how to clearly elucidate both Buddhist teachings (from early suttas to later commentaries) and scientific literature. In the best sense he is able to make sense of and clearly elucidate many difficult concepts: impermanence, no-self, co-dependent origination and the unreliability of our mental constructs. (This is where neuroscience really

comes in). He doesn't quite get emptiness right (not many people do)—he wants to pin it down to "things lack essence," which doesn't quite work; pinning it down to anything won't work. And his discussion of enlightenment seems misdirected.

Still, serious students of Buddhism can learn a lot from this book, because the science he cites is useful, and not as widely known in the Buddhist community as it should be. Consider, for example, Benjamin Libet's 1983 study in which the muscles of the hand begin to move before the brain has registered a decision. How better to elucidate what "human beings have no choice" might mean? (Wright actually uses this example to elucidate something slightly different, though.)

Rather than using these neuroscientific studies as illustration or metaphor, however, Wright is using them as proof: Buddhist notions do not stand on their own; they are *proved* by these studies. Buddhism is *explained* by evolutionary psychology. Although at times this approach disappears in clear explanations of both Buddhism and science, a steady argument begins about a third of the way through, when Wright introduces the notion of the modular mind, the mind as a patchwork of subselves, subroutines (my phrase, not his), some of which dominate some of the time, others at other times. This is why "no-self" is true, Wright argues: there is no self because there are many partial selves (modules) without a central control. These modules arise from the evolutionary process; humans with certain modules passed their genes on to offspring more successfully than humans without those modules. "We" (whoever that is) are usually the prisoners of these modules, in the sense that they tend to determine our behavior. So it is only logical that, toward the end of the book, he defines enlightenment as "tantamount to



a rebellion against natural selection,” that is, not being limited by the brain structures natural selection gives us.

The structure of his argument is, roughly, *this* [Buddhist concept] is explained by *that* [scientific concept]. These explanations miss important teachings. No-self is not just no-human-self. Enlightenment (or, if you prefer, awakening—Wright is aware of both translations of *bodhi*) is by its nature indefinable—not being limited by our brain structures is a side effect of enlightenment but not enlightenment itself. And while natural selection is as essential to biology as gravity is to physics, as with all scientific concepts it shape-shifts in its details as the science develops (consider, for example, the very recent field of epigenetics), so it is necessarily an unreliable foundation. (For an analogy, suppose someone in the eighteenth century justified the truth of Christian teachings by an appeal to Newtonian physics . . .)

Finally, there is his overarching summary:

If you want the shortest version of my answer to the question of why Buddhism is true, it’s this: Because we are animals created by natural selection. Natural selection built into our brains the tendencies that early Buddhist thinkers did a pretty amazing job of sizing up, given the meager scientific resources at their disposal.

This is where his argument leads him. But it seems somewhat tautological—if we are animals created by natural selection, then everything we do can be explained by our being animals created by natural selection—just as, if we are humans created in the image of God, then everything we do can be explained by our being humans created in the image of God. And his conclusion is not only tautological, but it contradicts itself. Wright is not only aware of but emphasizes the Buddhist teachings that we don’t really know anything, that our thinking misleads us, that we inevitably distort our reality. He knows that any theory will ultimately fail and is necessarily partial; he knows that our categories do not correspond to reality—he knows all of this, and then he reduces Buddhist teachings to a scientific theory about genes and their propagation.

So *Why Buddhism Is True* is a mixed bag. There’s a lot to learn here about Buddhism, especially Vipassana, about neuroscience and evolutionary psychology, about Asian and European philosophy. You can learn a lot of other things too, because Wright pulls in relevant material from a wide variety of sources. But the task that matters most to him—to answer *Why is Buddhism true?* in precise scientific terms—seems, to me at least, to be intrinsically doomed, a contradiction in its own terms. ♦

[25



Primary Point Archive

We are pleased to announce
that an extensive, searchable
archive of Primary Point
is now available online,
offered courtesy of
Universitat de les Illes Balears:
<http://joanmascaro.uib.cat/>



Universitat
de les Illes Balears



Kwan Um
School of Zen