

## ***The Monk and the Philosopher: A Father and Son Discuss the Meaning of Life***

**Jean-Francois Revel and Matthieu Ricard**

**Random House, 1998**

### **Reviewed by Leland Beaumont**

The relationship between father and son is always complex. Fathers want the best for their sons, and sons balance a natural tension of wanting to learn from father, and live up to his father's expectations, while exploring all that is new and exciting in the world. It is a respectful yet powerful tension between old and new, experience and novelty, obedience and autonomy, belief and curiosity, advice and adventure. This tension is richly realized throughout the remarkable dialogue created by these two brilliant men. The monk shares and explains what he learns from his years of conscientious practice of the Buddhist traditions. The philosopher critically analyzes what the monk presents and compares it to the philosophical traditions of the West while struggling to learn from his son.

The philosopher-father begins by asking the monk-son why he decided to leave a promising career as a molecular biologist to commit himself completely to the Buddhist practice. "In short", he answers, "science however interesting wasn't enough to give meaning to my life." Based on the limited exposure he had to the contemplative lifestyle through extraordinary documentary films by Arnaud Desjardins, he saw that the monks were the most sincerely happy people he knew of, and he wanted to explore and experience their authentic lifestyle for himself. "I had the impression of seeing the living beings who were the very image of what they taught." He goes on to say, "here were beings who seemed to be the living examples of wisdom." He met the Tibetan Buddhist lama, Kangyur Rinpoche and eventually studied with him for years until the teacher's death in 1975. He went on to study with Khyntse Rinpoche for 12 more years and was ordained as a monk in 1979. The younger monk seems wholly content with his decision.

"Suffering is the result of ignorance," he learned, and "ignorance, in essence is belief in a truly existing self and in the solidity of phenomena". However skeptical at first, observing the perfect being of his teacher convinced him of this truth and inspired him to absorb himself in the practice. He went on to learn that negative emotions arise from the notion of a self, the "me" that we all cherish, however, "attachment to the self is a fact, but the self that is the object of that attachment has no true existence; it exists nowhere and in no way as an autonomous and permanent entity." Destructive thoughts, such as hatred, are "liberated by looking at their nature", recognizing that thoughts have no substance, and releasing yourself from the illusion of their grip.

To dissolve a thought, begin by breaking the flow of thoughts for a few minutes. Just remain in awareness of the present moment, free of any conscious thoughts. As thoughts reappear, begin to examine the nature of discursive thoughts, looking for their source and substance, until you reach a state of 'not found' where thoughts vanish without leaving a trace. With the thought dissolved you can enter a state of inner simplicity, clear mindfulness, and awareness absent of any concepts. The monk attests that "working on oneself inwardly in this way gets rid of hatred, desire, jealousy, pride, and everything else that disturbs the mind."

The extraordinary introspective skills and beliefs of Buddhist monks are the results of years of conscientious practice guided by "contemplative science." The philosopher is skeptical, and refuses to accept evidence that is not materially observable by anyone wishing to see for himself. The monk compares the feats of Buddhist contemplatives to the skills of an Olympic athlete, who after many years of training, can jump 8 feet high. Certainly the ability to jump that high is extraordinary, and greatly exceeds the ability of any untrained athlete. We would not believe this was possible if we could not go to a track meet or watch coverage on TV and see extraordinary athletes repeating this amazing skill. The skills of highly trained monks are equally extraordinary, but not observable by others. However we can consider reliable testimony by many credible practitioners who have no reason to mislead or deceive. "A statement can be accepted as valid", the monk argues, "when there are substantial reasons for believing the person making it". In addition, we can directly observe the serenity of these expert practitioners.

"Action on the world is desirable", the monk tells his father, "while inner transformation is indispensable.", "This opening of the eyes of wisdom" he says referring to dismissing the illusions, "Increases your strength of mind, your diligence, and your capacity to take appropriate and altruistic action." This requires a strong mind, an unshakable certainty, and a radiant personality, without the slightest trace of ego, selfishness, or self-centeredness. "If a prisoner wants to free his companions in misfortune, he must first break out of his own chains", the monk assures us, "It's the only way to do it". The philosopher asks, "Do you mean that the only way to attain lasting peace in the world is the reform of the individuals?" The monk replies, "To think otherwise is surely utopian." "In any case," the monk elaborates, "the first thing is to make peace within oneself — inner disarmament; then peace in the family; then in the village; and finally in the nation and beyond."

"Western efficiency is a major contribution to minor needs" the son proposes to his skeptical father, "What Buddhism could help to change is the overall attitude that consists of giving priority to 'having' over 'being'. It's a matter of establishing a new order of values, giving priority to the quest for inner well-being." Buddhism provides a vision of tolerance, open-mindedness, altruism, quiet confidence, a science of the mind through which all people, including westerners, can find their

own inner peace. Buddhism simply offers to share an experience with anyone who wishes. The point isn't to convert people but to contribute to their well-being.

A disturbing chapter describes the Chinese invasion, occupation, and on-going destruction of Tibet, its people, and its culture since 1950. Millions of Tibetans were slaughtered, and 6,150 monasteries were destroyed nearly annihilating this unique and most peaceful culture. Despite this genocide the strong will of the Tibetan people still survives. The Dalai Lama lives in exile with about 100,000 Tibetans who still seek a peaceful return to their homeland. He often says, "Tibet has no petrol for engines, like Kuwait, but it does have petrol for the mind which should justify other countries coming to its rescue." He points out the advantages to be gained in making Tibet a buffer state, a haven of peace in the middle of major Asian powers. He passionately advocates for support from the most powerful nations and patiently awaits their action.

The monk offers us many more pearls; each explored in much more depth in the book:

- Truth is strong enough by itself to convince, and should never be imposed by force.
- The goal of nonviolence is specifically to diminish violence. It's not a passive approach.
- Evil has no more existence than a mistake; it is only an incorrect perception of reality.
- The great virtue of sin is precisely that it doesn't have any true existence. There's therefore no negative action or thought that can't be dissolved, purified, or repaired.
- The idea of man's true nature can be understood as a state of balance, while violence is a state of imbalance.
- It's obvious that unless a sense of responsibility develops in all the individuals sharing this planet, it'll be very difficult to apply any democratic ideals.
- Enlightenment is the discovery of the ultimate nature of both oneself and phenomena.
- Mastery of oneself, like so many other qualities, is only something of true value when it's based on the right motivation and metaphysical principles.
- What Buddhism calls meditation is a gradual discovery, over years of practice, of the nature of the mind and how mental events appear in it.
- It doesn't make much sense to think that because a truth is an ancient truth it's no longer worth bothering about.
- In spiritual practices the difficulties come at the beginning, and in worldly practice the difficulties come at the end.
- Without wisdom, reason will just argue about human happiness without ever actually bringing it about. Education needs to be more than just the accumulation of knowledge; it should really be education on how to be.

In the end each man gains a deeper understanding and appreciation for the other's beliefs, but neither abandons his chosen path.