



The science of Buddhism

Robert Wright says mindfulness can help us escape our delusions and live better lives

BY EMILY GREEN
STAFF WRITER

Buddhists had it right all along, and we have the science to prove it.

That's the premise of a new book from New York Times best-selling author, journalist and Princeton University professor Robert Wright ("The Evolution of God," "Nonzero").

In his new book, "Why Buddhism is True," Wright examines the Buddhist practice of mindfulness meditation from a scientific perspective to explain how it can hold the key to letting go of harmful illusions.

Thought patterns we've developed through evolution served a purpose historically, but they are often at odds with the modern world, Wright explains. Our natural tendencies can result in excessive anxiety and apocalyptic daydreams and lead us to crave pleasures without considering the consequences.

But with the simple practice of mindfulness meditation, Wright contends, we can begin to see these delusions for what they are and begin to experience a life free from their influence.

His book blends evolutionary psychology and evidence from various neurological studies with Buddhism truths and his own personal meditative path. The result is an approachable and at times humorous introduction to Buddhism, meditation and how the human brain functions.

The book guides readers to view their own thoughts with more objectivity, and it may lead some to question the old philosophical adage "I think, therefore I am."

Wright will be at Powell's City of Books on West Burnside at 7:30 p.m. Friday, Sept. 15 for a book signing and discussion.

Wright has written for The New Yorker, Time, The New Republic, Slate and The Atlantic, and he has been a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize and National Book Critics Circle Award.

He is also the president of The Nonzero Foundation, which operates two websites featuring split-screen interviews aimed at bridging national, religious, cultural, ethnic and



Robert Wright

PHOTO BY BARRY MUNGER

ideological divides: BloggingHeads.tv and TheMeaningOfLife.tv.

Street Roots recently spoke with Wright about his new book, how natural selection has led to delusional thoughts and how mindfulness meditation can help calm anxiety during the era of Trump.

Emily Green: *First, it's probably important that we establish what aspects of Buddhism your book argues are true. Can you explain what secular, or naturalistic, Buddhism is?*

Robert Wright: If you take away all the supernatural parts of Buddhism, like reincarnation, you're still left with a kind of amazing claim, which is that the reason we suffer and the reason we make other people suffer is that we don't see the world clearly.

We have illusions about ourselves, about other people, about the world broadly. Buddhism offers a practice, a path, to solving the problem. It's a path that includes meditation. I'm defending both the diagnosis – that our problem is that we don't see the world clearly – and I'm also defending the cure; that is mindfulness meditation in particular can help us become happier people, become better people and see things more clearly.

Most of us don't have time for a meditation practice that might promise us full-on enlightenment, as they say in Buddhism, but I think we can all make real progress with a fairly reasonable commitment of time.

E.G.: *Let's talk about the diagnosis first. This is as much a book about how the brain works as it is about Buddhism – and about how natural selection has shaped our thought patterns. How does evolutionary psychology affect the way we perceive the world around us?*

R.W.: A key point is that natural selection basically designs animals to get genes into the next generation, period. Humans are designed to be good at doing that in a particular environment: the hunter-gatherer environment that we evolved in.

But natural selection does not design animals to be happy or to see the world clearly, necessarily. If suffering or having illusions will help you get genes into the next generation, then suffering and illusions will be built into us by natural selection.

A good example of that is the gratification we feel upon indulging our senses, like when eating junk food or whatever, tends to evaporate, and we tend not to really reckon with that in advance.

In other words, when you're pursuing any gratifying goal, whether it's food or sex or getting a promotion, you focus on the gratification it will bring and not so much on the fact that the gratification will be fleeting.

When you think about that, it makes sense as a way for natural selection to engineer animals. Right? If after eating a meal, we were contented forever, we would never eat another meal and we would die. If after one sexual encounter, we just lay there basking in the afterglow forever, we'd never have sex again, and natural selection wants us to have sex multiple times because that increases our chance of getting genes into the next generation. So this is a case where both suffering, that is to say the restless longing

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