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that ensues after gratification evaporates, and a certain kind of illusion, that is to say, not fully anticipating the evaporation of the gratification, are built into us by natural selection. And this particular thing – not really reckoning with the impermanence of things, especially the impermanence of gratification – was a central theme in Buddhism from the beginning.

E.G.: *What are some of the ways that our modern environment tricks our hunter-gatherer minds?*

R.W.: There are two problems: One is that natural selection built suffering into people that they will experience even in the kind of environment they were designed for, like a hunter-gatherer environment. The second problem is that the modern environment can make things even worse.

For example, it's natural to feel anxiety about the safety of your children, or about what people think of you. You would expect to find a certain amount of anxiety for that reason even in a hunter-gatherer

environment. But in the modern environment that natural selection had no way of anticipating, you get whole new forms of anxiety. Like dropping your child off at a day care center where you don't know anybody; that's something that doesn't happen in the environment that we were designed for. Or having to give a presentation in front of people you've never met before; that didn't happen in the environment we were designed for, so you get whole new kinds of anxiety, and fortunately, meditation is pretty good at dealing with anxiety – at least it can be if you work at it. And it can change your relationship to unpleasant feelings in general.

I've had experiences where, if I start out by just accepting an unpleasant feeling like anxiety and experiencing it and examining it, ironically, I wind up viewing it from a critical distance, with a kind of detachment or non-attachment that reduces or even eliminates the suffering it causes me. And more broadly, mindfulness meditation promises to let you examine your feelings carefully and choose which ones you want to be guided by, and since some of these unpleasant feelings are not only unpleasant, they actually blur our vision in a certain sense, anxiety can sponsor crazy, apocalyptic scenarios about what's going to happen to you while public speaking or what's going to happen to your child in some situation. Given that some of these feelings that make us suffer also distort our vision, it only makes sense to approach them with some skepticism

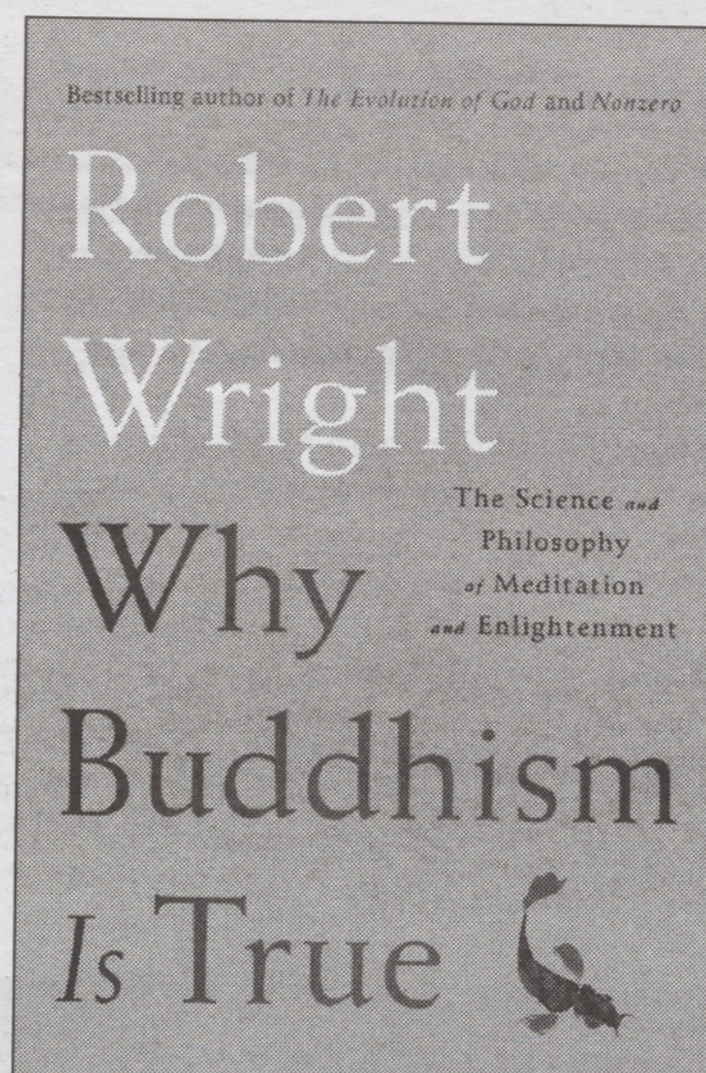


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and lessen their grip on us, and meditation can help us do that.

E.G.: *How would you describe mindfulness meditation to someone who is unfamiliar with it?*

R.W.: It usually starts by focusing on something like your breath. If all goes well, you will stop your mind from wandering restlessly, and it will allow you to start focusing on things.

What you then do is just observe, carefully, things you might not normally notice, including things inside your mind, like feelings, thoughts. You basically heighten your awareness of the elements of experience, and some of the most important elements are parts of your mind.

But in principle, having attained this focus and attained some equilibrium, you can also focus on things like sounds with much more clarity than usual. In fact, you can find beauty in things that you normally might not.

When I meditate, sometimes the refrigerator near me starts humming. Believe it or not, the humming of a refrigerator can be a beautiful thing, and you can notice things about it you wouldn't ordinarily notice. It turns out that the hum actually consists of at least three different noises that are independently varying and together they can create a sound that can be beautiful in a certain way.

E.G.: *One thing I think will probably resonate with any reader who has ever dabbled in meditation is the way you humorously and honestly talk about your own failed attempts at maintaining focus during meditation. Is that something that has gotten easier with practice, or does it still happen to you now and again?*

R.W.: Oh, I still have trouble. I consider myself the opposite of a naturally good

meditator. I have a very limited attention span. I don't, by nature, have a ton of emotional equilibrium. And that's why, in my case, it took a weeklong silent meditation retreat to really make me appreciate meditation. A lot of people can pick it up much easier than that, but for me, the retreat convinced me it was worth developing a daily practice. And it has ups and downs. There are days you just feel you can't concentrate at all and you got nothing out of it, but by and large, I find the day goes better when I meditate and that the rewards are sufficient to keep me doing it. I also find the more time I find to do it each day, the better things go and the fewer regrettable things I do.

E.G.: *I had an Aha! moment while driving the other day, and I thought of your road rage explanation that you describe in your book – how evolutionary psychology created the road rage phenomenon. Just thinking about that really helped me to let go of the anger. I'm having a harder time letting go of negative feelings when it comes to annoying people who I know. Any tips on how to do that with mindfulness?*

R.W.: Natural selection designed us to have this category of "enemy," and once somebody is in that "enemy" category, it's hard for them to get out because we are designed to evaluate their behavior in ways that reinforce the enemy label.

If they do something good, we tend to explain it away as some kind of ploy or some kind of showing off, but if they do something bad, we say yeah – that is the real them emerging.

I think it helps for starters to understand the cognitive bias that creates and sustains the enemy category and to understand that our labeling of enemies is biased in favor of selfishness.

It's not an objective view. It's not a pronouncement of God's that this person deserves your wrath. It's a reaction you had while pursuing your own agenda. Which isn't to say there aren't people who have truly earned the enemy label; it's just to say that not everybody has. That is step one, and then I think meditation can help, but I think it can help more if you first understand what I just said about the very origins of the concept of enemy.

Now, there are specific types of meditation designed to deal with this – one is called loving-kindness meditation. I have never had huge success with that, but everyday mindfulness meditation does sometimes put me in a frame of mind that allows me to think of someone that I basically don't like, and just think about them in a more charitable way – almost like their mother might think of them – where I suddenly understand that there are reasons that they behave in a way that bothers me. You know how good mothers are at explaining stuff like that – "She didn't get her nap" – and I find that meditation can give me a little of that perspective, but it's a real challenge. This stuff isn't easy.

E.G.: *You started this journey with a meditation retreat back in 2003, and since that*

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ROBERT WRIGHT,
AUTHOR OF "WHY BUDDHISM IS TRUE"

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IF YOU GO

What: Book signing and discussion with Robert Wright

When: 7:30 p.m. Sept. 15

Where: Powell's City of Books, 1005 W Burnside St., Portland

