

The Quantum and the Lotus: A Journey to the Frontiers Where Science and Buddhism Meet

By Matthieu Ricard, Trinh Xuan Thuan

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Matthieu Ricard trained as a molecular biologist, working in the lab of a Nobel prize—winning scientist, but when he read some Buddhist philosophy, he became drawn to Buddhism. Eventually he left his life in science to study with Tibetan teachers, and he is now a Buddhist monk and translator for the Dalai Lama, living in the Shechen monastery near Kathmandu in Nepal. Trinh Thuan was born into a Buddhist family in Vietnam but became intrigued by the explosion of discoveries in astronomy during the 1960s. He made his way to the prestigious California Institute of Technology to study with some of the biggest names in the field and is now an acclaimed astrophysicist and specialist on how the galaxies formed.

When Matthieu Ricard and Trinh Thuan met at an academic conference in the summer of 1997, they began discussing the many remarkable connections between the teachings of Buddhism and the findings of recent science. That conversation grew into an astonishing correspondence exploring a series of fascinating questions. Did the universe have a beginning? Or is our universe one in a series of infinite universes with no end and no beginning? Is the concept of a beginning of time fundamentally flawed? Might our perception of time in fact be an illusion, a phenomenon created in our brains that has no ultimate reality? Is the stunning fine-tuning of the universe, which has produced just the right conditions for life to evolve, a sign that a “principle of creation” is at work in our world? If such a principle of creation undergirds the workings of the universe, what does that tell us about whether or not there is a divine Creator? How does the radical interpretation of reality offered by quantum physics conform to and yet differ from the Buddhist conception of reality? What is consciousness and how did it evolve? Can consciousness exist apart from a brain generating it?

The stimulating journey of discovery the authors traveled in their discussions is re-created beautifully in *The Quantum and the Lotus*, written in the style of a lively dialogue between friends. Both the fundamental teachings of Buddhism and the discoveries of contemporary science are introduced with great clarity, and the reader will be profoundly impressed by the many correspondences between the two streams of thought and revelation. Through the course of their dialogue, the authors reach a remarkable meeting of minds, ultimately offering a vital new understanding of the many ways in which science and Buddhism

confirm and complement each other and of the ways in which, as Matthieu Ricard writes, “knowledge of our spirits and knowledge of the world are mutually enlightening and empowering.”

“*The Quantum and the Lotus* is a mind-expanding, eye-opening exploration of the exciting parallels between cutting-edge thinking in physics and Buddhism—a scintillating conversation any thinking person would delight in overhearing.”

—Daniel Goleman, author of *Emotional Intelligence*

“*The Quantum and the Lotus* is the rich and inspiring result of a deeply interesting dialogue between Western science and Buddhist philosophy. This remarkable book will contribute greatly to a better understanding of the true nature of our world and the way we live our lives.” —His Holiness the Dalai Lama

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

How did the universe come into being? What is the meaning of human life against the blackness of infinity? Religion and science have many answers to these and like questions, answers that sometimes meet but more often diverge.

In this book-length conversation, French Buddhist monk Ricard and Vietnamese-born astrophysicist Trinh explore how Buddhism and modern science address life's big questions. Among the matters they touch on, sometimes fleetingly and sometimes in depth, are the illusory nature of phenomena, the guiding intelligence of nature, and the search for the mechanisms that drive planets and humans alike. Both authors, each conversant in the other's medium, argue against reductionist views of nature. And both provide plenty of data that support Albert Einstein's declaration that "if there is any religion that could correspond to the needs of modern science, it would be Buddhism."

Hard-nosed skeptics will perhaps find Ricard and Trinh's reconciliation arguable. Still, the record of their conversation makes fascinating reading and provides a useful overview of scientific reasoning and spiritual inquiry. --*Gregory McNamee*

From Publishers Weekly

This transcribed and expanded dialogue between Buddhist monk Ricard and astrophysicist Thuan claims few original insights but provides a good general introduction to science-and-religion issues representing two notably different Buddhist perspectives. At its best, the book is animated by contrasts. Thuan, a Vietnamese-American trained at CalTech, identifies with Buddhist ethics and spirituality, but his worldview often reflects Western science and philosophy. Ricard, a French biologist who emigrated in the 1970s to become a disciple of Khyents, Rinpoche, speaks from the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. Although Thuan and Ricard find common ground on many ethical matters and agree in a general way about the "interconnectedness of phenomena," they also run into genuine disagreements about cosmic origins, the nature of consciousness and the orderliness of the universe all areas where traditional Buddhist beliefs are in tension with scientific theories or their implications as commonly understood in the West. To the authors' credit, they avoid superficial reconciliation of these differences, although Ricard, who renounces "dogmatism" but consistently defends orthodoxy, sometimes claims to "refute" opposing viewpoints a little too neatly. The conversational format also limits the precision and depth of the authors' positions and at times becomes unnecessarily repetitive. Philosophical dialogue is an ancient but exquisitely difficult art, and even the most engaging verbal exchange may occasionally appear banal or rambling in print, especially when the same points of debate arise time and again.

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From Library Journal

Tibetan Buddhist monk and author of another recent dialog, *The Monk and the Philosopher*, engages astrophysicist and popular author Thuan (*The Secret Melody*) in a discussion about the nature of reality. Each chapter focuses on a theme, e.g., the origin of the universe, time, multiple/parallel universes, and interdependence. Some themes seem outside the boundaries of physics (e.g., creation), and Ricard often has the final say at the end of each chapter. In addition, the content of the book can be challenging at times. But

Ricard and Thuan excel at bringing the fundamental elements of each perspective to the lay level, and even when minds do not meet, the reader is enriched with a better understanding of Buddhist and scientific explanations of reality. Those put off by the dialog format should not dismiss this book, as the content successfully carries the reader. This volume will appeal to those who enjoyed works such as Fritjof Capra's *The Tao of Physics* (Shambhala, 2000) and B. Alan Wallace's *Choosing Reality* (Snow Lion, 1996).

Extensive end notes provide myriad avenues for further exploration. Recommended for public libraries.

Andy Wickens, King Cty. Lib. Syst., Seattle

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