

Summary of “Why Buddhism is True” by Robert Wright

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Learn the science and philosophy behind Buddhism and how meditation can improve your relationship with yourself and the world around you.



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Introduction

What is “truth?” Author Robert Wright recognizes that truth is subjective, and proving that Buddhism is *true* is a rather tricky business. In fact, a key concept of Buddhism is to be suspicious of how you interpret the world and what you believe to be true. Early Buddhist writings even go as far as to cast doubts about whether “truth” ultimately exists. However, the Buddha explains in his most famous sermon the “The Four Noble Truths,” so the discussion of the meaning of the word *truth* certainly seems appropriate when discussing Buddhism. Wright attempts to do just that throughout his book, *Why Buddhism is True*, where he argues that Buddhist beliefs surrounding the human predicament are fundamentally correct, and that modern psychology and neurology ultimately prove the validity of those beliefs. Of course, you don’t have to adopt Buddhism to adopt their beliefs, Wright recognizes that Buddhist ideas may conflict with ideas in other traditions. This is where the quote from the Dalai Lama comes into play, as he states, “Don’t try to use what you learn from Buddhism to be a better Buddhist; use it to be a better whatever-you-already-are.”

Life is like The Matrix

What if life was like the movie *The Matrix*? If you aren't familiar with it, the movie centers around a guy named Neo, who discovers that he's been living in a dream world and his life is actually an elaborate hallucination. He's been told that he's a slave, born into a prison that he cannot taste, see, or touch. Instead, he's been born into a prison for your mind, a prison called *The Matrix*. Neo is offered two choices: to take the blue pill that will return him to the dream world, or take the red pill and break through the shroud of delusion. Of course, Neo chooses the red pill.

The Matrix saw success as people discovered many connections to their own lives, that we too are in prisons of our own minds. Okay, maybe we aren't living a hallucination in which our physical bodies are stuck inside some gooey, coffin-sized pod. But, what if we aren't in complete control of our lives and decisions? I mean, we grew up believing in the Tooth Fairy and Santa Clause, right? So maybe it's not such a stretch to believe that we are somewhat living in delusion.

Let's take the example of junk food. When we eat junk food, we feel briefly satisfied as we indulge in something that tastes good. But soon after, we crash after the sugar rush or we feel regret. We spend a lot of our lives looking for the next gratifying thing - the next powdered-sugar doughnut, the next sexual encounter, the next online purchase. But soon the thrill fades, and it leaves us wanting more. But why? Because we were designed by *natural selection*.

In other words, we do things like eat, have sex, search for popularity, and outdo rivals because those are the things our ancestors had to do for survival. Each of these activities feels pleasurable, but that pleasure doesn't last forever. But that's the point, if it did, we would never seek it again. If we simply experienced a lifetime of basking in the afterglow of a sexual encounter, we certainly wouldn't seek it again, and that's no way to

continue the next generation! As a result, pleasure is fleeting and we spend our lives seeking the next pleasurable experience.

Natural selection simply wants us to be productive, and the way to make us productive is to make the anticipation of pleasure very strong but the pleasure itself not very long-lasting. Each pleasurable experience triggers a response in our brain, which releases dopamine each time we taste a new enjoyable food or receive a promotion. However, our anticipation of that experience is more exciting than the experience itself. In one study, researchers observed a monkey's response when given a sweet juice. Predictably, dopamine was released right after the juice touched the tongue. Then, however, the monkeys were trained to expect drops after a light turned on. Eventually, more dopamine was released when the light came on versus when the juice hit the tongue. In other words, the excitement of anticipating the reward was more pleasurable than the reward itself.

Luckily, by understanding this concept, you can begin to accept the teachings of Buddhism that aim to provide some balance in your life.

The Key to Meditation

A major part of Buddhism is the importance of meditation. The struggle with meditation, however, is opening your mind and blocking out the thoughts that trickle in and out constantly. Author Robert Wright struggled with this practice. You see, he compares himself to Bobby Knight, the college basketball coach famous for his red, furious face and for once flinging a chair onto a basketball court. Of course, Wright has never thrown a chair onto a court, but he is certainly not very calm or tolerant which made meditating quite difficult.

To try and master the art of meditation, Wright decided to attend a week-long retreat that included five and half hours of meditation each day, silent meals, and listening to teachers with no access to cell phones, tv, internet, or even books. When Wright was meditating, he would become increasingly frustrated as he failed to push thoughts out of his mind and only focus on his breathing.

Eventually, during one of the few moments he was allowed to talk, Wright approached his teacher to discuss why he couldn't meditate. He mentioned that he struggled to keep his mind from wandering. His teacher responded with, "that's good." What the teacher really meant is that it's good that Wright is noticing the times his mind is wandering, even if it's all the time. Through this lesson, Wright learned that usually when his mind wandered, he would follow it wherever it went, not even aware that it was being led. Now, however, he was only following for short stretches of time before breaking free.

In other words, Wright was beginning to observe what psychologists call the "default mode network." This is a network in the brain that is active when we are doing nothing - not talking, not focusing on work, not reading a book or watching a movie. It is the network along which our mind wanders when it's wandering. While our minds wander to many places, we mainly allow our minds to focus on past and future experiences. But what

it's not doing is directly experiencing the present. Learning how to abandon this network is the key to meditation, and to do that, you try to focus on your breath. The mind needs *something* to focus on.

When you can abandon this default network mode, you begin to feel good, almost like you are liberated from your chatting mind and able to find peace. This feeling is why people continue to turn to meditation, it serves as a positive reinforcement that sustains the practice. However, the biggest lesson Wright learned through meditation is how to take charge by letting go. Throughout his meditation practice, Wright suffered from tooth pain and anxiety. These feelings, he realized, were not under his control, if anything, they were controlling him. Once he quit seeing these things he couldn't control as part of his 'self,' he was liberated from them, and therefore, back in control. As you'll learn in the next chapter, abandoning your *self* is a key concept in Buddhism.

The Not-Self and the Self

An important aspect of Buddhism is the concept of the *self*. The concerns of people in the Western world are largely selfish, as we tend to be obsessed with looks and how people perceive us. The Buddhist idea of *anatta*, however, introduces the notion that the self does not exist. Anatta can be translated to “not-self,” and is a concept that is largely practiced rather than discussed. Despite the idea that the not-self cannot be explained, Wright tries his best.

Walpola Rahula, a Buddhist monk, once published an influential book titled *What the Buddha Taught*. In it, he stated, “According to the teaching of the Buddha, the idea of self is an imaginary, false belief which has no corresponding reality, and it produces harmful thoughts of ‘me’ and ‘mine,’ selfish desire, craving, attachment, hatred, ill-will, conceit, pride, egoism, and other defilements, impurities and problems. It is the source of all the troubles in the world from personal conflicts to wars between nations. In short, this false view can be traced to all the evil in the world.”

According to Buddhism, the world would be a much better place if more people realized they didn’t have a self. Luckily, you can achieve this even with a small amount of practice. The not-self experience isn’t a threshold that you suddenly cross or an achievement that you may or may not reach. Instead, even with a modest daily meditation practice, you can experience a bit of not-self. Even if you never reach a full not-self experience, you can improve over time which can benefit both you and humankind.

So if you are trying to achieve a non-self experience, then what is the *self*? This question may seem a bit too philosophical for many, but according to Buddha, the self is not the typical body, mind, or spirit that many Western people believe it to be. Instead, the self is simply just consciousness. Consciousness is inside the body, but isn’t limited to a single body, and isn’t burdened with attributes like appearance, intellect, or material objects. In other words, our looks, intelligence, and belongings are simply an illusion.

Luckily, it is possible to achieve a state of pure consciousness through meditation.

Who's Really in Control?

Nowadays, modern psychologists are beginning to support the Buddhist idea that we are not entirely in control of our reality. Robert Kurzban, a professor of psychology at Penn, suggests that “You aren’t the president, the central executive, or the prime minister.” In other words, our conscious self is not some all-powerful executive authority. But if the conscious mind isn’t in control, then what is? It may be hard to admit that we aren’t in control because it *feels* as if we are, we believe our conscious self is in charge of our behavior and our decisions; however, many experiments have begun to cast doubt on this belief.

The most famous experiments are those involving the “split-brain” experiments when people underwent a procedure that separated the left and right brain hemispheres. Researchers sought to confine information to a single hemisphere by only presenting it to half of the patient’s visual field. For example, if a word is presented only to the left visual field, which is processed by the right hemisphere, it won’t enter the left hemisphere at all since the hemispheres have been surgically separated.

However, despite this separation, patients were still inexplicably communicating with the other part of their brain. For instance, the left hemisphere is what largely controls language. So patients whose right hemisphere was exposed to the word *nut* report no awareness of the input; however, their left hand which is controlled by the right hemisphere, will rummage through a box containing various objects and produce a nut.

Similarly, some participants had their right hemisphere exposed to a prompt telling them to walk. When they did walk, the participant was asked why. Providing such an explanation would require a left hemisphere recollection which participants didn’t have. Regardless, the participants always created an explanation for why they stood up to walk that had no relation to what really occurred.

What these experiments aim to prove is that we may not be in as control of our actions as we once thought. In other words, you may think that you're the director of your own movie, but you're actually watching it. Even worse, the movie may be directing you. Unless, of course, you manage to liberate yourself from it like Neo was able to do in The Matrix.

Emotions Control Us

Imagine a robot whose brain worked like the human brain. If you were to ask the computer scientists to describe its workings, they'd simply explain how the brain consists of lots of overlapping modules, and modules within modules and the robot's circumstances determine which modules are, for the moment, running the show. However, the scientists would have trouble pointing to a part of the robot's programming and say, "This part is the robot itself."

But what controls those modules? Wright and many psychologists largely believe that these modules are controlled with feelings. For instance, *The Shining* makes you feel fearful, and this fear plays a role in activating the "self-protection" module which might make you seek shelter in a crowd. In other words, feelings are calling the shots. Feelings are what "decide" which module will be in charge for the time being.

One of the strongest feelings is jealousy. During the 1980s and 1990s, psychologists Leda Cosmides and John Tooby studied the effects of jealousy and discovered how transformative this emotion can be. When it comes to sexual jealousy, our minds are subject to incredible changes including thoughts of violence and desertion, the desire to make oneself more competitively attractive, the decline of trustworthiness, and much more. In fact, a person's attitude and disposition can change so much, that a new self may emerge and control the mind.

This study of jealousy reinforces the Buddhist belief that we actually have very little control over ourselves. There is no one self, no CEO that runs the show. Instead, there are a series of selves that take turns running the show, seizing control through feelings. So how can you take back control of your emotions? Well, Buddhism can help through mindful practice and mindfulness meditation. Through practice and meditation, you can learn how to control your feelings and observe them without acting upon them. So instead of yelling at your partner when you get angry, you can recognize

that anger is simply temporary and, instead, have a mindful conversation about your emotions.

Controlling Your Impulses

When you go shopping, how often do you buy something you didn't plan to? Perhaps you created a shopping list, and while you bought everything on that list, a few more items somehow appeared in your cart. While you may not buy unplanned items all the time, we've all fallen guilty of this at some point in our lives. In fact, this phenomenon has been studied since as early as the eighteenth century when philosopher David Hume wrote that human reason is "the slave of passions."

Now, a quarter of a millennium after Hume caught up with Buddhism, science is catching up with Hume. In an experiment done by cognitive scientists at Stanford, Carnegie Mellon, and MIT, participants were given real money and offered to buy items such as wireless headphones, electric toothbrushes, Star Wars DVDs, and so on. While participants were viewing and analyzing each product, their brains were being scanned.

Researchers were watching which parts of the brain got more active and which got less active, and surprisingly, they found that none of these parts of the brain were associated with rational deliberation. Instead, the active areas were parts associated with feelings. For instance, the nucleus accumbens, the part of the brain associated with pleasure, gets more active when people anticipate rewards or see things they like. The more active this part of the brain when looking at a product, the more likely the participant was to buy it. Ultimately, when we weigh the pros and cons of buying a product, our strongest feeling (attraction or aversion) wins.

Since we learned in the previous chapter that emotions control us, it should come as no surprise that many of our decisions are controlled by emotions as well. So when you buy the latest and greatest smartphone or piece of technology, it's not your fault, but your emotions. Of course, you can learn to control these impulses, but how? Once you realize that emotions have significant power over your decisions, you can start to practice self-control by reasoning in an emotional way. Instead of simply stating "I don't need

that piece of chocolate because it makes me gain weight,” you should use a form of meditation to help connect yourself emotionally to your decisions.

You can do this by taking a moment to visualize yourself after you have cut junk food, like chocolate, out of your diet. You may visualize yourself in that outfit that you loved but can't fit into anymore, or imagine the feeling you'll get when you look in the mirror and love your body again. When you pair reason and emotion, you can begin to take back control of your decisions and learn how to control your impulses.

Construct Your Reality

One of the most powerful aspects of meditation is the ability to control impulses and natural reactions, even in the most un-ideal situations. After Wright struggled to meditate and keep his mind from wandering, he finally had a breakthrough on the fifth morning of his retreat. During his meditation, he began to feel an unpleasant feeling in his jaw caused by the overconsumption of caffeine that morning. Of course, the pain began to take over his mind, but he soon made a lifechanging discovery.

While focusing on the pain of his jaw, he began to think to himself, “Yes, the grinding sensation is still there...But that sensation is down there in my jaw, and that’s not where I am. I’m up here in my head.” He was no longer identifying with the feeling; instead, he was viewing it objectively. This realization is one of the key concepts of Buddhism in which humans can transcend pain and, in a sense, detach from it.

In June of 1963, a monk named Thich Quang Duc staged a public protest of the South Vietnamese government’s treatment of Buddhists. Duc placed a cushion on a street in Saigon and assumed the lotus position. After another monk doused Duc in gasoline, Duc pled for President Ngo Dinh Diem to take a mind of compassion towards the people of the nation and implement religious equality. Then he lit a match. Journalist David Halberstam, who witnessed the event, wrote, “As he burned he never moved a muscle, never uttered a sound, his outward composure in sharp contrast to the wailing people around him.”

You see, life is about how we perceive experiences and Wright questions which of our “normal” feelings are actually illusions. Perhaps, many unpleasant feelings like anxiety, fear, self-loathing, melancholy, and even pain are illusions that we can eliminate through meditation. Wright experienced negative feelings like anxiety when he felt the pain of his jaw during meditation. He felt the pain, he recognized it was there, but he eventually detached from it, realizing that pain was a separate experience.

Similarly, on that same retreat, Wright was able to take uncomfortable situations and turn them into positive experiences.

Outside his bedroom was an electric saw that constantly buzzed, which made a supposedly peaceful retreat, not quite peaceful. However, his mindfulness teacher reminded Wright that a key concept of Buddhism is to accept your current situation. Wright took this to heart and changed the way he perceived the constant buzzing outside his window. Instead of an annoying saw, that buzzing became a melodic tune, music that he could enjoy from the comfort of his room. By changing his perception, he was able to transform an uncomfortable noise into an enjoyable experience.

Wright understood that negative emotions like pain, anxiety, and annoyance are all just illusions. If we can meditate and change our perceptions, we can transform how we perceive the world around us. Additionally, you can begin to create a more positive life for yourself that not only benefits you but everyone around you.

Final Summary

Buddhism has many similarities to The Matrix. In the movie, Neo's mind is physically separate from his body; however, this idea isn't necessarily groundbreaking. Buddhist practices of mindfulness meditation can help us learn to separate our minds and bodies as well, just not physically.

Buddhism largely believes that we are not what we think, that anxiety, fear, self-loathing, jealousy, and other negative emotions are all just illusions. We can transcend those feelings and separate them through mindfulness meditation and a change in perspective. And now, these ideas are backed by psychology and neurology who have proven that we aren't as in control of our minds as we once thought. Through adopting Buddhist practices, we can not only improve our relationships with ourselves but also find peace and joy that many people spend their lives seeking.



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