

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

Jean-François Revel
and
Matthieu Ricard

Schocken Books, New York 1998
ISBN: 0-8052-1103-9

Review by Michael Levin

Jean-François Revel is a leading French intellectual of an older generation, classically educated, philosopher and writer, member of the Academie Française, well known for his criticisms of Christianity and Marxism, as well as contemporary politics. His son, Matthieu Ricard, received his doctorate in molecular biology at the Institute Pasteur in Paris, where he was a student of some of the most eminent biologists at that time. In 1972, he left this career after meeting several Tibetan teachers in Darjeeling, and became a student of Tibetan Buddhism and then a monk, living in Nepal, where he studied with Dujum Rinpoche and Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, two of the greatest meditation masters of the twentieth century (now both deceased). Since then he has translated many important books from Tibetan into French and English, and served as interpreter for his holiness the Dalai Lama. Both father and son have an impressive bibliography.

This book is the result of a dialog,-- a series of conversations between father and son recorded in Nepal in 1997. It is noteworthy for the brilliance of the conversation, its leisurely but focused exploration of two different world views, its relevance to the important issues of this planet at the beginning of the twenty first century, and for the respect, openness, and love shown by both the father and son.

Except for the last chapter and the written conclusions by both authors, it is Jean-François who asks the question that sets the agenda of each discussion, after which they tend to share the time more or less equally as good listeners. This is as it should be, for Matthieu is well aware of his father's world view, having grown up with it, whereas Jean-François is exploring the Tibetan Buddhist mind, intelligently, systematically, always with the hope that it may offer some form of salvation to the painful contradictions of the Western mind set.

If the reader, like this reviewer, is American, it is important to be aware that in Europe, and certainly in France, philosophy still matters—at least to those who consider themselves cultured and educated, and that it is considered worthwhile to have an articulated view of our civilization, where it has been, and where it is headed. I find this refreshing, and since Mahayana Buddhism also has a very complete and well articulated world view, although not one based on historical development, this heightens the level of communication in the dialog and keeps it focused.

Early in the book, Jean-François asks if Buddhism is a religion or a philosophy. The importance of this question follows from his view of the three main themes in European culture and their failings. The first of these, Christianity, offers profound moral teachings, and sound ethical advice as to how to live in the world. But for Jean-François, the problem is that it is founded on a dogma based on belief in God, heaven and hell, and has little persuasive power for most modern people who in practice put more trust in a materialistic view of reality. The second theme is the utopian or revolutionary view that salvation comes from how society is organized, and that to improve humanity, society has to be remade from the top down. But this has led to the horrors of the reign of terror after the French revolution and to Communism, to Stalin, Mao Tse Tung and Pot Pol, to entire nations engulfed in war and murder, material impoverishment, starvation, and the breakdown of cultural norms of decency. The third theme, founded on the European age of enlightenment, is rational philosophy, science, and the hope for improving the lot of humanity by means of social justice and technology. Jean-François, an atheist, is most comfortable here philosophically, but as the twentieth century draws to a close, he sees materialism as failing to be a source of human values, and despite hopes to the contrary, an over-populated world full of terrorism, exploitation and pollution. Does Buddhism offer a philosophy free from superstition and dogmatism, but full of insight into how we can live our lives spiritually and peacefully, and also be of benefit to others? This is the overarching question on which the dialog is structured, and the basis for all his probing.

It is Matthieu's role to explain Buddhist teachings and to return the focus to the central view of Buddhist philosophy and practice again and again, which he does well and in complete concordance with the wisdom of the teachers with whom he has studied. His language is simple, authentic, and filled with vivid images and metaphors.

Metaphysics is a central theme of the dialog. Jean-François is thoroughly schooled in Western philosophy starting with the ancient Greeks, and continuing through all the European schools of thought through the twentieth century. He is well aware of how metaphysics underlies all our thought and action, regardless of whether it is articulated or unexamined. At every stage in his examination of Buddhism, this sharpens the sword of his insight.

The reader can only ignore or diminish metaphysics at the peril of missing Jean-François' concerns altogether. Particularly in America, there is a strong tendency to regard metaphysics as being a frivolous preoccupation with things which are beyond observation and therefore don't really matter. They do matter. If our metaphysics is unexamined, it is nevertheless real, and influences how we think and behave.

In particular, the Buddha taught that the root cause of all suffering is wrong views, mistaken beliefs about reality, or, to state it alternatively, bad metaphysics, at such a deep level in our minds that we have lost awareness of this. From our false belief regarding the nature of the self and the nature of phenomena external to the self comes the perceived need to protect and expand the self, and the experience of being imprisoned by space and time, and from these arise conflicting emotions such as desire, hatred, ignorance, pride and jealousy, which cause one to be self-centered and lack compassion for others. However, the Buddhist antidote is not to replace bad metaphysics with better metaphysics, but to transcend metaphysics altogether. Such teachings are found in the Buddha's "noble silence" and reach full expression in the Madhyamikakarika (Middle Way Verses) of Nagarjuna. Madhyamaka is a dialectic technique for showing that all formulations of reality are inadequate, and its purpose is to move the practitioner to experience reality directly, freed from views altogether. All the skillful means of Tibetan Vajrayana Buddhism as well as such Zen techniques as koan practice have this goal. The fruition is not just the sudden experiences or realizations that may occur on the path, but the continual maturation of the openness, tranquility, energy, intelligence and compassion of the practitioner, and ultimately Buddhahood.

Chapter by chapter, Jean-François works his way through his important questions. How does Buddhism view mind and matter? Is consciousness just a phenomena that arises when matter is organized in certain complex ways? Is Buddhism really a science of the mind? What is enlightenment? Is it extinction or annihilation? Is there a self? Does the self have free will? Does Buddhism conflict with science? Does it encourage or conflict with social justice?

Arriving at psychoanalysis, Jean-François states rather flatly that Freud proved that there is an unconscious part of the mind which is simply unknowable except by indirect means, but which determines to a large extent who we are and how we behave. What does Buddhism have to say about that? Matthieu replies that this is a rather premature conclusion. After all, Western psychologists' attempts at introspection are rather amateurish compared to the contemplation of Buddhist meditators who over many centuries have engaged in long retreats. Indeed, no one who has practiced meditation sufficiently to arouse even the smallest glimmer of meditative insight would ever hold to Freud's opinion. Aspects of mind seeming to be outside the range of awareness is a relative matter, and as our obscurations are resolved by meditation, mind becomes clear and transparent. Jean-François has no reply. Here is one case where Buddhist practitioners have clearly done a better job of empirical research than Western scientists.

In conclusion, Jean-François becomes more and more attracted to Buddhism as a system of wisdom, with a meditative path that produces peace, compassion, and open-mindedness, but also more and more skeptical of its metaphysics. The problem is Matthieu's insistence that mind unlike our bodies, is not created or destroyed. But, Jean-François replies, if the "self" is merely a delusion as Buddhism claims, how can the self reincarnate? The question is important because if consciousness is simply a phenomena arising from the way our bodies and brains are structured and function, then in the end,

we are limited and trapped by death. If this is so, there really is no satisfactory answer, and the most honest position is that of the ancient Greek stoics who taught that one should bravely and compassionately make the best of this rotten deal. The bottom line is that metaphysics does matter, and Jean-François has not yet figured a way out.

The Buddhist response to this is not easy to explain or to experience without much transformative work. It is a path, more than a theory, and it is based on meditation and a teacher-student relation, as Matthieu explains. It is a vast subject, and time to end this review. If your mind wishes to engage such issues, then you will find the book well worth reading and contemplating. This contemplation is a useful first step, and already begins to generate a sense of peace and compassion.

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