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the Meaning of Life

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AND MATTHIEU RICARD



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# THE MONK AND THE PHILOSOPHER

*A Father and Son*  
*Discuss the Meaning of Life*



JEAN-FRANÇOIS REVEL  
and MATTHIEU RICARD

*Translated from the French by John Canti*  
*Foreword by Jack Miles*



*Schocken Books New York*

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Originally published in France as *Le Moine et le Philosophe: Le Bouddhisme Aujourd'hui* by NiL éditions, Paris, in 1997. Copyright © 1997 by Jean-François Revel, Matthieu Ricard, and NiL éditions. This translation originally published in Great Britain by Thorsons, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers Ltd., London, in 1998.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Revel, Jean François.

[Moine et le philosophe. English]

The monk and the philosopher: a father and son discuss the meaning of life / Jean-François Revel and Matthieu Ricard; translated from the French by John Canti; foreword by Jack Miles.

p. cm.

eISBN: 978-0-307-78701-9

1. Buddhism – Doctrines. I. Ricard, Matthieu. II. Title.

BQ4165.R4813 1999 128 – dc21 98-36031

Random House Web Address: [www.randomhouse.com](http://www.randomhouse.com)

v3.1

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## FOREWORD

by Jack Miles

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Conversation is at once the most primitive and the most refined expression of the human mind. We rightly cast even the experience of solitary insight in the dialogue form: “It occurred to me,” “It came to me,” as if “it” had something to say and wanted me to listen, or if “it” wanted to start something. The conversation that fills this book is one that may well start something – especially as the reader begins to talk back.

As in the Louis Malle film *My Dinner with André*, Matthieu Ricard and Jean-François Revel talk of ideas, but the mood that lingers throughout their talk is intimate. The two are in sharp disagreement about issues that each considers of great moment, yet each cares about the other as well as about the outcome of their debate.

Ricard, the younger man, a doctor of molecular biology, worked for some time with Nobel Prize-winning French biologists François Jacob and Jacques Monod at the renowned Institut Pasteur in Paris. Then, still early in his career, he surprised family and friends by leaving Paris for an apprenticeship with Tibetan spiritual masters in Darjeeling, India, an apprenticeship that led before long to a true conversion to Buddhism. Ricard now lives in Nepal and devotes much of his time to the translation (into French and English) of Tibetan literature, both ancient and modern.

Revel, the older man, Ricard’s father, is a philosopher and political commentator influential on both sides of the Atlantic. Best known here for works like *Without Marx or Jesus* and *The Totalitarian Temptation*, he is also the author of works of philosophically informed cultural commentary like *The Flight from Truth: The Reign of Deceit in the Age of Information*.

In their dialogue, Ricard defends the validity of his own life-changing experience of enlightenment. His response to what he found in Darjeeling did not entail, as he saw it, an repudiation of what he knew as a scientist. Though admittedly a subjective experience, it was valid in its own way and as worthy of intellectual respect as objective science. Revel doubts the ultimate validity of Ricard’s or any experience of which no objective, neutral account can be given. He maintains that any truth claim not accessible, at some level, to the methods of science must rest ultimately on religious faith, and the leap of faith is one he declines to make. The issue between them, in sum, is whether Tibetan Buddhist meditation may be understood as a humane secular practice uncomplicated by quasi-religious commitments or hostages to metaphysics, so to speak. Revel sees hostages. Ricard sees none – or no more than are surrendered by science itself.

The experience in question may be one that few Americans have had, but it is one of which most Americans have heard. The Zen Buddhism of Japan has had a substantial American following since the 1950s. In more recent years, the Dalai Lama has become an international celebrity. Within the past year, Buddhism (Tibetan rather than Japanese) has been on the cover of *Time* magazine.<sup>1</sup> By and large, however, the American frame of reference for the Buddhist experience has remained either historical, as in the college world-religions survey course, or therapeutic and quasi-religious, as in the wide variety of settings where meditation continues to be taught as a technique for stress reduction or inner peace. For American science and philosophy, Buddhism has generally not been an item on the agenda.

Whence the novelty and the interest in a debate about Buddhism conducted by a French scientist-turned-monk and a French philosopher. France, the mother country of Western

secularism, has made a sharp turn toward Buddhism in recent years, a phenomenon that has been discussed at length in almost every major French magazine. According to some estimates, Buddhism – with some two million adherents – will soon become the third religion in France: after Catholicism and Islam but ahead of Protestantism and Judaism. Do Buddhism's growth in France stem from the revival of a latent French religiosity, or are its roots to be found rather in French secularism and its perennial hunger for a plausible secular alternative to religion? I suspect the latter, but something subtler is under way that would be captured in a line like "If not Jesus, Marx; and if neither Jesus nor Marx, then perhaps Buddha"; for though Christianity without Christ and Marxism without Marx are impossible, Buddhism – at least in some of its forms – actively encourages Buddhism without Buddha. *you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him*, to quote one of Zen Buddhism's many paradoxical sayings. Revel and Ricard's book-length discussion of Buddhism became a best-seller in France in good measure, I suspect, because it subjects this emerging secular alternative to a relatively rigorous scientific and philosophical cross-examination. The combined effect of their credentials and the popular success of the book may well win a new scientific and philosophical hearing for their topic itself.

Will this be the effect of the book in the United States as well? I am thinking, as I ask this, of my experience in 1997–98 teaching a survey of world religions as a visiting professor at the California Institute of Technology. Caltech students, all young scientists in training, signed up for this course in unprecedented numbers, regarding it evidently as a welcome addition to the curriculum. The Caltech faculty, however, including notably the faculty of the humanities and the social sciences, though without hostility to the course or to the students who were taking it, were themselves quite without curiosity about it. Were all these new unsettled questions? Why unsettle them?

Their intellectual tone of voice, as it were, is one I hear again in Jean-François Revel. If his own son had not gone so deeply into Buddhism, one wonders whether Revel would ever have looked into this tradition on his own. His assumption, broadly, seems to be that all the basic options were rehearsed long ago in the Hellenistic moral philosophy in which he is so well-versed. But then Ricard is not just his son. Ricard has deeper formal training in the very science to which Revel has so large a philosophical commitment. Intellectual respect as well as paternal devotion requires that the father take the son seriously as the latter makes life commitments that call the scientific worldview into question.

Science as a worldview has a far broader constituency than does science as a profession. I venture to say that a majority of educated Americans will tend, as they follow this dialogue, to side first with Revel. This will be the case even for many who may retain a nominal affiliation with some form of Christianity or Judaism, for the truth of science and the adequacy of its methods are assumptions by now too widespread and habitual in the culture for even religious believers to escape them. I hasten to add, however, that the minority that will side with Ricard in this debate is not a group that rejects science as science, any more than Ricard does, but only one that has deep reservations about a Western philosophy of life assumed to be in accord with science.

Let me call this secular Western philosophy of life the philosophy of enlightened self-interest. Most of us assume that there is ultimately no alternative to enlightened self-interest as a moral code just as we assume that there is no alternative to the scientific cosmology as



picture of how the world has come to be physically. And yet a widespread weariness, malaise, lingers about that assumption, and the measure of this malaise is the sense of liberation that a significant minority experiences at the suggestion that the self, the object of all this enlightened interest, may be itself an illusion. Many of us are bored with or burdened with the self, increasingly as little able to believe in it or serve it as to believe in or serve God.

Enlightened self-interest seems to hold as a necessary postulate that the world is real and the world's goods really worth acquiring. A stock portfolio, a law degree, a flat stomach, a art museum membership card, a foreign vacation, a sex life, a baby – the list is long, and each item on it seems to have generated an advertising campaign, a market strategy, an expert adviser. *Materialism* is too narrow a word for the army of cultural imperatives that both preserve and besiege the Western self. *Narcissism* might be better, or *solipsism*, or *cultural autism*. Whatever word or phrase is chosen, it is clear that a revulsion has begun to set in. The news that the self which is served by all this effort, this calculation, this cultivation, this from-birth-onward preparation – the news that this self may be an illusion is news that, for the affected minority, seems already to have arrived. They welcome it less as revelation than as confirmation.

This is the minority that, to repeat, will spontaneously take Ricard's side in this dialogue. But the majority, whatever it might begin by wishing, will eventually find it difficult to ignore Ricard if only because Revel has been unable to ignore his son, and Revel is right there on the page. As a formidable opponent of totalitarianism, Revel is *eo ipso* a formidable proponent of liberal Western individualism, of that enlightened self-interest which accords so well with Western science. But just this synthesis is “performatively” called into question when a pure-bred son of that tradition like Ricard converts to Buddhism. Revel is not stopped by Ricard's conversion, but he is slowed by it – he is given pause; and those pauses function here as intermissions during which latecomers may be shown to their seats. The latecomers are others who, skeptical as Revel is skeptical, can find through him their entry point into this emerging, extremely broad cultural debate.

The issue that neither Jean-François Revel nor Matthieu Ricard can be done talking about is a difficult scientific/philosophical issue; namely, the genesis of consciousness. The following exchange is typical of many:

*JEAN-FRANÇOIS* – According to traditional metaphysical ideas, whatever belongs to consciousness can only be born from what's conscious, and matter can only be born from matter. That's also something you'd find in Plato, in seventeenth-century philosophy and in Descartes' statement that there can't be more in the effect than in the cause. But then, on that very point, the whole of modern science shows the contrary, on the basis of experiment and observation that can't just be discounted or scorned. It's the thesis that your former boss Jacques Monod, in particular, set out in *Chance and Necessity*: that the biological world arises from the material world, and consciousness arises from the biological world. There's an evolution, therefore, along those lines – the birth of life from matter, then the evolution of species leading little by little to consciousness and language. This, we could say, is the scheme of things now generally accepted by

contemporary science.

*MATTHIEU* – According to Buddhism, the conscious isn't just a more and more complex and perfect development of the inanimate. There has to be a qualitative change there, not just a quantitative one. There's nothing wrong with the observation that the gradually increasing complexity of the organization of the nervous system, as forms of life get higher, goes hand in hand with gradually increasing intelligence. But Buddhism holds that even very elementary forms of life are endowed with some form of consciousness – extremely primitive perhaps, but different from matter alone. As you progress up the evolutionary ladder, the faculty of consciousness becomes more and more effective, deep and developed, culminating in human intelligence. So consciousness is manifested to a varying extent in different supporting mechanisms and in different conditions.

...

*J.F.* – So where would that consciousness come from, even the very primitive one in some microscopic creature?

*M.* – Buddhism answers that by saying that it can only come from a previous life, according to the law of 'conservation of consciousness' analogous to the conservation of energy in the world of matter.

*J.F.* – That's not, of course, what science would think at all.<sup>2</sup>

Jean-François is right, and Matthieu knows that he is right about "what science would think," but recall that it is Matthieu, not Jean-François, who is the doctor of biology. Revel might well have insisted even more than he does that the doctrine according to which consciousness can only come from consciousness is one that the West believes it has tried and found wanting. But does Ricard not know this as well, and does Revel not know he knows it?

Ricard, I believe, does indeed know about the turn toward materialism that has occurred in Western thought since the scientific revolution, but he regards this shift, the shift from pre-scientific metaphysics to science as we know it, to be, finally, just the shift from one metaphysics to another. As he puts it at another point in the conversation:

Buddhism has absolutely no objection to [scientists'] description of the functioning of the human nervous system on a physical level, but would maintain that to take consciousness as being limited to that physical mechanism was a metaphysical belief, rather than a scientifically proven fact.<sup>3</sup>

Ricard can speak as he does because the one thesis for which there can be in principle no scientific evidence is the thesis that only scientific evidence counts. And on this point Ricard's old boss, Monod, is in perhaps surprising agreement with his student.

The decision "to take consciousness as being limited to ... physical mechanism" must come first, Monod has written. It is not the result of research. It is the premise that guides research. As we may read in *Chance and Necessity*:

It is plain that to make the postulate of objectivity a condition for true knowledge constitutes an ethical choice and not a knowledge judgment inasmuch as according to the postulate itself, there can be no 'true' knowledge before this arbitrary choice. The

postulate of objectivity, in order to establish a norm for knowledge, defines a value which is objective knowledge itself. To accept the postulate of objectivity then is to articulate the basic proposition of an ethics: the ethics of knowledge.<sup>4</sup>

Should Ricard wish to return to the Institut Pasteur, he need only put this arbitrary postulate of objectivity back in its methodological place and proceed accordingly. Though he may have left the game, there is no reason to believe that he has forgotten the rules. He has simply drawn a further lesson from the fact, admitted by his mentor, that scientific objectivity is located within and guaranteed by the scientists' subjectivity.

In a revealing moment in *Chance and Necessity*, Jacques Monod confesses that he has on occasion found himself identifying with a protein molecule. The remark betrays an asceticism, a sacrifice of normal selfhood to scientific inquiry, that is undeniably impressive even heroic. But if there is a noble pathos about the method, there is an even greater pathos about the results. It was Monod's rare gift to be able to speak of this pathos with sacerdotal eloquence:

If he is to accept this message [the accidental and purely physical character of human consciousness] in its full significance, man must at last awaken from his primeval dream to discover his total solitude, his radical strangeness. He knows now that, like a Gypsy, he must live at the edge of the universe, a universe deaf to his music, as indifferent to his hopes as to his sorrows and his crimes.<sup>5</sup>

*Univers sourd à sa musique, indifférent à ses espoirs comme à ses souffrances ou à ses crimes.* . . . Monod puts all this with extraordinary eloquence. He makes it seem – as, classically, religious visions have always seemed – inevitable, inescapable, final. One may well guess that to escape the gravity field of this vision, Ricard might have had to flee halfway around the world. And yet what Monod as the Ecclesiastes of our time presents as the human condition Monod as logician, as philosopher of science, traces unflinchingly to an “arbitrary choice.” Ricard has simply seized the freedom he had – the freedom Monod knew he had – to make another equally “arbitrary choice.” The question remains: Why did he make it?

The answer seems to me to have two parts, one expressed, one unexpressed. Ricard tells us, simply and affectingly, that he found a moral excellence in the émigré Tibetans – shaped as he knew they were, by their practice of meditation – a spiritual depth that became, for him, an empirical fact as undeniable as anything in the laboratory. What he does not tell us so explicitly is that he needed what they had. They were different, unlike anyone he had known before, and he was drawn by the difference, drawn so strongly that he wanted to track it to its source.

Though the laboratory enforces a code of behavior for those behaviors which occur within the laboratory itself, the one general moral lesson that the scientific worldview has to impart is that the cosmos teaches no general moral lessons. The universe is not just deaf to our music, to use Monod's image; it is also playing no music to which we might hope to tune our own hearing, our own being. Tibetan Buddhism, I venture to say, disagrees, and at this point so does Ricard.

The Judeo-Christian tradition, believing in a God who transcended nature, has never been a tradition that taught submission to or harmony with nature, but the will of this God, his te

commandments, the example he gave when he revealed himself in human form as Jesus Christ – all this was for many centuries the music to which the West sang. Some still hear the music, but for a great many the music has died, whence the great dilemma of post-Christian secular Western culture. For a good while now, it has had only science to turn to, and what science says is that there is no music but the noise that each hears autistically in his own head. This is less an answer than the refusal of the question. If life can only be lived in this way, then death begins to have a strange charm, or perhaps more exactly, all those expressions of enlightened self-interest that animate Western culture begin to seem a *dance macabre*. If you join the dance, then it is as if you have already died. No wonder that in some of the best fiction and poetry now being written, a recurrent subject is death within life, anaesthesia, numbness, acedia.

It is by no means my personal thesis that Tibetan Buddhism, or any form of Buddhism, is the one remedy for this sickness unto death. In fact, I confess a certain regret that in confronting these perennial issues, neither Revel nor Ricard shows any acquaintance with the resources of Christianity or Judaism. Ricard reports a late visit to a French monastery and finds many points of similarity between his own experience of meditation and that of the Catholic monks. But one might have expected a Frenchman to begin rather than end his spiritual quest with a visit to the Grande Chartreuse. “Christianity is an oriental religion,” to quote the lapidary first sentence of Jean-Claude Barreau’s preface to Olivier Clément’s landmark study of the sources of Christian mysticism. The German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer spoke of “religionless Christianity,” the American Mark C. Taylor of “a/theology.” And there are no fewer points of contact between Tibetan mysticism and the ancient Torah, the mysticism of Judaism’s Kabbalah, or between the paradoxes of Buddhism and those of Judaism as explored by a modern Jewish-French thinker like Emmanuel Lévinas.<sup>6</sup>

But in the post-Christian West, where the hope of salvation has disappeared almost without remainder into a craving for success, the appeal of Eastern detachment, as an escape from it and a repudiation of this craving, may be larger than anything that can be synthesized from Western materials. To quote from an ancient Buddhist source:

Now pleasant sensations, unpleasant sensations, indifferent sensations, Ananda, are transitory, are due to causes, originate by dependence, and are subject to decay, disappearance, effacement, and cessation. While one experiences the pleasant sensation, one thinks that ‘I’ am experiencing it. And after the cessation of this same pleasant sensation, one thinks that ‘I’ have ceased experiencing it.<sup>7</sup>

And similarly for unpleasant and indifferent sensations. So dependent is the self on sensations, that where there are no sensations there can be no “I.” But from this it can be inferred that the self is as subject to “disappearance, effacement, and cessation” as the sensations. And it may be easier for a great many of our contemporaries to move from this perception to a calming and liberating disidentification with self than it is to move to the same point from any form of devotion to God, particularly to a God who loves the world, hears its music, and suffers with its suffering.

One way or another, the encounter that all of the world’s pre-scientific religious or mystical or spiritual or psychotherapeutic traditions will continue to have with world science, each separately in its own unpredictable way, will prove more decisive for them than the

encounter that any one of them may have with any other one. When Jean-François Revel speaks for science, what he does, in effect, is demand that Matthieu Ricard confront the scientist still alive and well in himself. Revel quite properly insists that Ricard, though devotee of Tibetan Buddhism, remains a man of the West.

We should not be surprised. At the turn of the millennium, all foreign relations are becoming domestic, and an “East-West” dialogue may be conducted as easily by two Easterners or two Westerners as by a mixed pair. By that token, the Ricard–Revel conversation is simultaneously a Ricard–Ricard and a Revel–Revel conversation along a fissure which each opens in the other. Deep growth often entails in this way a marring of surface integrity, a temporary alienation, a disorder en route to an enlarged order. It can only be so in a conversation which, taken as a whole, is a remarkable episode in one of the large civilizational encounters of our time.

1. On this broad cultural phenomenon, particularly in its American manifestation, see Donald S. Lopez, Jr., *Prisoners of Shangri-La: Tibetan Buddhism and the West* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).
2. From text, pp. 140–41.
3. From text, p. 64.
4. Jacques Monod, *Le hasard et la nécessité* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1970), p. 191 (my translation).
5. Monod, pp. 187–88.
6. Olivier Clément, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism*, translated by Theodore Berkeley, O.C.S.O., and Jeremy Hummerston from the original French edition *Sources*, copyright © 1982 Editions Stock, Paris, preface by Jean-Claude Barreau (New York: New City Press, 1995). Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (New York: Macmillan, 1972). Mark Taylor, *Erring: A Postmodern A/Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984). Emmanuel Lévinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings*, translated by Annette Aronwicz (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1990).
7. Adapted from Henry Clarke Warren, *Buddhism in Translation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1922), p. 136 (Mahānidāna-Sutta of the Dīgha-Nikāya, 25621).

## INTRODUCTION

*by Jean-François Revel*

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How did the idea of this book arise? What made us want to do it? Or made several people put friendly pressure on us – as they say in politics – to consider it in the first place? One of the two of us, I am writing this introduction on my own simply as a matter of convenience to avoid the labored circumlocution we would have needed to cover, both together, the widely divergent motives that bring us to this shared interest of ours. Indeed, the complexities of our two approaches to the same subjects are exactly what the conversations in this book are intended to sort out and gradually distinguish.

It would be superfluous to say more here about what will be dealt with amply in the conversations that follow. Suffice it to describe briefly the meeting of lives and minds that created the initial spark.

My son Matthieu Ricard was born in 1946. After secondary school at the Lycée Janson-d'AILLON, he embarked on a brilliant university career in molecular biology which led him to a doctorate in 1972. The chairman of the board examining his thesis was François Jacob, an eminent winner of a Nobel Prize for biology, in whose research team he had worked for several years at the Institut Pasteur. Suddenly, at this point, Matthieu announced to his brother and myself – to our great consternation – that he had decided to abandon scientific research to go to live in Asia, and follow the teachings of Tibetan Buddhist lamas. This was a total change in his life, which would later lead him to become a Buddhist monk.

My own university studies were essentially in literature and philosophy. I taught philosophy for several years, and then left academic life in 1963 to devote myself fully to a new career as a writer and newspaper editor. However, I never lost my enthusiasm for philosophy, and have written about it in several of my books.<sup>1</sup> Unlike many philosophers, I have always felt a keen interest in the evolution of science. Hence my satisfaction at having my son in first-rate scientific research, and my disappointment at seeing him abruptly put an end to a career whose beginnings had been more than promising. Moreover, my own point of view as a convinced atheist did not induce me to take Buddhism very seriously – not that I had anything against it, for its unadulterated and straightforward approach give it a distinctive position among religious doctrines and have earned it the respect of some of the most exacting Western philosophers.

Despite feeling momentarily upset about his decision, I never fell out with Matthieu, nor was I ever even on bad terms with him. I mention this because some recent articles in the French press claimed, without a shred of truth, that we had not seen each other for twenty years and that our plan to do a book together marked a reconciliation between us. In fact, over the years, we have continued to see each other as often as the distances permitted. As early as 1973, I visited him in Darjeeling, India, where he was living with his first spiritual teacher, Kangyur Rinpoche, and later on in Bhutan and Nepal. The only clouds that ever passed over our relationship were those of the Asian monsoon. As time went on, Matthieu had increasingly frequent opportunities to travel to Europe, on trips that led him to take part in the growing spread of Buddhism in the West. His role as interpreter for the Dalai Lama, especially after the latter was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, brought him to France even more often.

The unforeseen phenomenon of the spread of Buddhism is indeed one of the things that

suggested to us the idea of a conversation on 'Buddhism and the West'. Such was the title we had planned for our dialogue, in fact, until our publisher, Nicole Lattès, found a much better one: *The Monk and the Philosopher*.

What exactly is Buddhism? That is the overall question, the answers to which have been Matthieu's particular responsibility. Why does Buddhism today in the West attract such a large following and so much curiosity? Here, it has been more my task to suggest some hypotheses. Is it a consequence of recent changes, disappointing ones perhaps, undergone by Western religions and philosophies, as well as political systems? It goes without saying that the content of our exchanges derives a particular value from the fact that they took place not between a Western philosopher and an Eastern sage but between a Western philosopher and a Western monk trained in the East who, moreover, was originally a scientist and is capable, on his own and in himself, of comparing the two cultures at the highest level. Indeed, Matthieu has, in a way, transposed his scientific rigor to the study of the Tibetan language and tradition, and for twenty years has been helping to preserve and publish the fundamental sacred texts, ancient and modern, of Tibetan Buddhism, and translating them into French and English.

The texts that still exist, at least. For, as everyone now knows, the Chinese communists destroyed whole libraries full of them, at the same time as the six thousand or so monasteries in which they were housed. The massacres and destruction began with the invasion of Tibet by China in 1950 and its annexation in 1951, and grew more and more intense, first during the repression that followed the Tibetan uprising and subsequent crackdown in 1959, then during the Cultural Revolution. It was in 1959 that the Dalai Lama and over a hundred thousand Tibetans escaped into exile in India or the Himalayan kingdoms of Nepal, Bhutan, and Sikkim, before spreading out to many countries of the world. Communist colonialism tolerated no ideology other than its own, no intellectual, religious, or artistic freedom. With implacable ferocity, it set out not only to pillage Tibet's natural resources shamelessly but also to destroy Tibetan civilization – even the Tibetan language. Far from easing off as time went on, the Chinese extermination of the Tibetans and their culture intensified again in the eighties, despite the so-called 'liberalization' ushered in by Mao's successors. It is true that since 1980, while torture and summary executions have continued to take place, there has been no wholesale slaughter comparable to that of the sixties and early seventies, during which a million Tibetans – a sixth of the population – were annihilated. But destruction of Tibetan civilization has continued. Liberalization is confined to economic life, for pragmatic reasons and to bring material improvement. Beyond these domains, there is no freedom in China, even for the Chinese. And in Tibet Mao's successors have applied Stalin's old colonial method: populate the annexed region with your own nationals until they outnumber the native inhabitants.

There would be no point in denying that my indignation at the martyrdom of the Tibetan people was one of the things that reinforced my interest in Buddhism. Another, also of sentiment, came even more naturally – that it was the religion my son had adopted. I wanted to know more about what lay behind his decision and its consequences. As for Chinese politics, in 1983, I devoted several pages of my book *How Democracies Perish*,<sup>2</sup> mostly from information that Matthieu supplied, to a detailed description of the Tibetan genocide, which had lasted for almost three decades without world opinion being much affected or even much

informed. That this small and isolated country – which posed no threat at all to its large neighbor – with its peaceful, pastoral people following a religion free of any proselytizing should be the target of attempted annihilation by Stalinist-Maoist Marxism seemed to me a symbol of our century, skewered almost from beginning to end by the logic of totalitarianism.

For a long time after the Dalai Lama had been forced to flee into exile to escape enslavement or even death, news about Tibet remained difficult to obtain. The Tibetan question was buried for fifteen or twenty years by the self-censorship of a West wallowing in its idolatry of Maoism and reluctant to heed any criticism of communist China.

This evocation of the crimes of Chinese communist barbarity is not just a detour from the subject of these conversations between ‘the monk and the philosopher’. It was the long stay of the Dalai Lama and numerous other Tibetan lamas, Buddhist teachers, and Rinpoche outside their own country that provided the circumstantial cause for the increased spread of Buddhism in the West. Their accessibility made it much easier, geographically speaking, for Westerners to discover the most authentic teaching of the doctrine – and not just a bookish, indirect, theoretical teaching, but a living one, at firsthand, flowing from the very source, in the most qualified proponents. Another consequence of the tribulations inflicted by Chinese communism has been to reveal the Dalai Lama’s political talent. All the solutions he has put forward to China to end the enslavement of his people have been realistic, moderate and nonviolent. They are also oriented toward the setting up of democracy in Tibet, which should please Westerners, if not Tibet’s occupying forces. He has developed a subtle but cheerful way of dealing with the Western democracies’ leaders, recognizing nevertheless how riddled with timorous servility they are before the irritable bureaucrats of Beijing.

For a long time, the conventional image that the West had of Buddhism was of a wisdom based on passivity and inaction, ‘nirvana’ defined as an inwardly turned indolence indifference to the running of community and society. We now know that it is nothing of the sort. Like most Western philosophies, Buddhism too has its human, social, and political dimensions.

Such, in brief, were the circumstances and motives that finally led Matthieu and myself to take the decision one day to confront whatever questions we each had and to explore our mutual curiosity, in order to throw light on our similarities without hiding our differences. That is how and why, in May 1996, the conversations that follow took place in Hatibara, Nepal, a peaceful spot high up on a mountainside above Kathmandu.

1. Particularly *Histoire de la philosophie occidentale de Thalès à Kant* (A History of Western Philosophy from Thales to Kant), Nour Éditions, Paris, 1994, and *Pourquoi des philosophes?* (Why Philosophers?), Laffont Bouquins, Paris, 1997.
2. Doubleday, New York, 1984.





*JEAN-FRANÇOIS* – I think the first thing we should emphasize is that the idea of this book was neither yours nor mine. It was suggested to us by some publishers who heard your story. I knew that I was your father, and thought it would be interesting for us to compare points of view. So let me just begin by mentioning some details. You started out studying very successfully for a degree in biology, and then became a graduate student under François Jacob, working for several years in research at the Institut Pasteur. For your doctoral thesis, which you presented at the Paris Faculté des Sciences in front of an examining board that included François Jacob and other eminent biologists, you were awarded a highly commended Ph.D. What makes the series of conversations we're about to have so interesting, then, is the fact that you're someone steeped in European, Western scientific culture at the highest level who subsequently, or simultaneously, adopted this philosophy or religion rooted in the East, Buddhism. The reason you took to it, it should be said, wasn't that you were looking for some extra element in your life, or a religious adjunct to a career that would continue normally according to Western criteria. Rather, you abandoned your career in order to commit yourself completely to Buddhist practice. So my first question is this: when and why did that decision begin to germinate in you?

*MATTHIEU* – My scientific career was the result of a passion for discovery. Whatever I was able to do afterward was in no way a rejection of scientific research, which is in many respects a fascinating pursuit, but arose rather from the realization that such research was unable to solve the fundamental questions of life – and wasn't even meant to do so. In short, science, however interesting, wasn't enough to give meaning to my life. I came to see research, as I experienced it myself, as an endless dispersion into detail, and dedicating my whole life to it was something I could no longer envisage. At the same time I was becoming more and more interested in the spiritual life in terms of a 'contemplative science'.

At first my interest in the spiritual wasn't clearly formulated, as my education had been completely secular and I'd never practiced Christianity. Without knowing anything about religion itself, I'd always felt, from the outside, a sort of reverential fear when I went into church or met a monk. Then, as a teenager, I started to read quite a few books on different religious traditions. On Christianity, Hinduism, and Sufism, but, paradoxically, not much on Buddhism. At the time, in the sixties, few authentic translations of Buddhist texts existed. The small number of available essays and translations tended to reiterate, rather awkwardly, the distorted way in which the West perceived Buddhism in the nineteenth century as a nihilistic philosophy advocating indifference to the world. Thanks to my uncle Jacques-Yves LeDuc, a yachtsman, I also discovered the writings of the French metaphysician René Guénon. All this stimulated and nourished my intellectual curiosity about religion, without leading to anything more concrete. For me, it all stayed quite intellectual.

*J.F.* – Intellectual in what sense?

*M.* – I found that reading these works full of meaning satisfied me deeply and opened me

mind, but didn't really bring about any inner transformation.

*J.F.* – How old were you at this point?

*M.* – Oh, I suppose about fifteen. I'd also read some records of interviews with Ramana Maharshi, an Indian sage who was said to have attained knowledge of the ultimate nature of the mind, nonduality. But what triggered my interest in Buddhism was in 1966 ...

*J.F.* – You would have been twenty then.

*M.* – I was still at university, and just about to go to the Institut Pasteur, when I saw some films made by a friend, Arnaud Desjardins, as they were being edited. They were about the great Tibetan lamas who had fled the Chinese invasion and taken refuge on the southern side of the Himalayas, from Kashmir to Bhutan. Arnaud had spent several months on two trips with an excellent guide and interpreter, filming these masters at close quarters. The films were very striking. Around the same time, another friend, Dr. Leboyer, came back from Darjeeling where he'd met some of the same lamas. I'd just finished a course and had the chance of taking a six-month break before starting my research work. It was the time of the hippies, who'd set out to India overland hitchhiking or in a Citroën *deux-chevaux*, through Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. I was also drawn to the martial arts and had thought of going to Japan. But the sight of the pictures brought back by Arnaud and Frédéric Leboyer, what they told me and their descriptions of their encounters there, all helped me make up my mind to head for the Himalayas rather than anywhere else.

*J.F.* – So it was Arnaud Desjardins's film that started it all off.

*M.* – There were several films, *The Message of the Tibetans* and *Himalaya, Land of Serenity* (which included *The Children of Wisdom* and *The Lake of the Yogis*), four hours in all. They include long sequences of the great Buddhist teachers who'd just arrived from Tibet – what they looked like, how they spoke, what they taught. The films give a very alive and inspiring account of what it was like.

*J.F.* – Were they shown on television?

*M.* – Yes, several times from 1966 onward. They've recently been made available on videocassette.<sup>1</sup> They're extraordinary documentaries.

*J.F.* — At the time of the Cultural Revolution there was a renewed upsurge of Chinese repression in Tibet. Was that when those Tibetan lamas had fled the country?

*M.* – In fact, those who were able to escape at all had left long before, during the fifties. As the result of a disagreement, Tibet had practically broken off diplomatic relations with China between 1915 and 1945. It had a government and maintained relations with several foreign countries. Then, little by little, China began to infiltrate Tibet. Chinese officials came to visit the country. They said they felt an affinity for Tibetans and their culture. They went as far as making offerings in the monasteries. They promised to help the Tibetans modernize their country. But in 1949 they began a military invasion of Tibet, starting with the East, the region of Kham. The invaders showed no mercy, and as the years went by it became more and more obvious that they were going to conquer central Tibet, seize power, and capture the Dalai Lama. He therefore fled to India in 1959. Immediately afterward, the frontiers were sealed off and a period of savage repression began. Men, women, and children were thrown into prison or sent off to labor camps. Whether executed or succumbing to torture and famine in the camps and prisons, more than a million Tibetans – one in five of the population – died following the Chinese invasion. Enormous mass graves were filled up, one after the other.

Even before the Cultural Revolution, six thousand monasteries, practically all of them, were destroyed. The libraries were burnt, the statues broken, the frescoes ravaged.

*J.F.* – What! Six thousand!

*M.* – Yes, there are six thousand one hundred and fifty monasteries on the list of those that were razed. And when you think that the monasteries in Tibet were the repositories of the culture! It reminds me of what Goering said: ‘When I hear the word culture, I get out my revolver.’ It’s a fact probably unprecedented in human history that of Tibet’s population up to twenty percent were ordained – monks, nuns, hermits in retreat in caves, learned lamas teaching in the monasteries. Spiritual practice was beyond any doubt the principal goal of life, and lay people too saw their daily activities, however necessary, as being of secondary importance compared to their spiritual life. The whole culture was centered around its religion. So in annihilating the monasteries, the centers of study and the hermitages, it was the soul – the very root of Tibetan culture – that was being destroyed. But the Tibetan strength of mind proved impossible to destroy. Smiles, money, propaganda, torture, and extermination: the Chinese tried the whole gamut to change the Tibetans’ minds. But nothing succeeded. The Tibetans’ hopes of preserving their culture and regaining their independence is still intact.

*J.F.* – Let’s come back to your story. We were talking about Arnaud Desjardins’s films. You said they left a strong impression on you, personally. Why?

*M.* – I had the impression of seeing living beings who were the very image of what they were taught. They had such a striking and remarkable feeling about them. I couldn’t quite hit on the explicit reasons why, but what struck me most was that they matched the ideal of sainthood, the perfect being, the sage – a kind of person hardly to be found nowadays in the West. It was the image I had of St. Francis of Assisi, or the great wise men of ancient times, but which for me had become figures of the distant past. You can’t go and meet Socrates, listen to Plato debating, or sit at St. Francis’ feet. Yet suddenly, here were beings who seemed to be living examples of wisdom. I said to myself, ‘If it’s possible to reach perfection as a human being, that must be it.’

*J.F.* – I was about to say, about your definition – exactly, in fact it’s almost commonplace to emphasize that what characterized the philosophy of the classical period was that theory and practice went together. For the ancient philosopher, philosophy wasn’t just an intellectual teaching, a theory, an interpretation of the world or of life. It was a way of being. His philosophy was something that he and his disciples would put into practice in their lives, at least as much as they would theorize about it in their discourses. The first thing that impressed you when you came across Tibetan lamas is an approach that also lay at the very origins of Western philosophy. That, incidentally, is why philosophers had a role to play in listening, teaching, counseling, providing moral support and edifying company for a large number of important people up to the end of the Roman Empire, especially at the time of Marcus Aurelius, which Ernest Renan called ‘the reign of the philosophers’. So here we’re talking about an attitude that certainly used to exist in the West – not just to be content with teaching, but to be the reflection of what you teach, in your very way of life. That said, whether in practice it was really lived out as perfectly as one might have wished is another question. Such a notion of philosophy was also, in many cases, related to the religious side of things. Ancient philosophy usually included that dimension, inasmuch as it was also a form of

personal salvation. The Epicureans had that approach (although in modern usage the word 'epicure' implies indifference to any spiritual dimension). So there was always that doubt, need, to develop a doctrine and at the same time to actually live and embody that doctrine. In the age of classical philosophy, therefore, there was no fundamental difference between West and East.

*M.* – That's right, except that Tibetan Buddhist masters are not trying to develop a doctrine but rather to be faithful and accomplished inheritors of a spiritual tradition thousands of years old. In any case, for me it was a great comfort to know that an authentic living tradition still existed, and was there for the asking, like a whole collection of beautiful things laid out on display.

*J.F.* – But what were those beautiful things – what did that doctrine bring you? It's not enough to live and embody just any old doctrine. It has to be a doctrine with some worth!

*M.* – At the time I had little idea what Buddhism was all about, but simply to see those wise men, even through what can be communicated in a film, gave me a sense of deep inspiring perfection. It was a source of hope, by contrast with my experience hitherto. In the world I'd grown up in, thanks to you I'd met philosophers, thinkers, theater people; thanks to my mother (Yahne Le Toumelin, the painter), I knew artists and poets like André Breton, Maurice Béjart, Pierre Soulages; thanks to my uncle (Jacques-Yves Le Toumelin, the sailor and famous explorers); thanks to François Jacob, the eminent scientists who came to give lectures at the Institut Pasteur. I'd had the opportunity to make contact with people who in many respects were fascinating. But at the same time the genius they showed in their particular field was not necessarily accompanied by what you could call human perfection. All their talent, all their intellectual and artistic skills, didn't necessarily make them good human beings. A great poet might be a rogue, a great scientist unhappy with himself, an artist full of self-satisfied pride. All sorts of combinations, good or bad, were possible.

*J.F.* – I remember, by the way, that at the time you were also very keen on music, astronomy, photography, and ornithology. When you were twenty-five you wrote a book on animal migration,<sup>2</sup> and there was a whole period in your life that you spent deeply immersed in music.

*M.* – Yes, that's true. I met Igor Stravinsky and other great musicians. I was lucky enough to mix with many of the people much admired in the West, and to be able to make up my own mind and ask myself, 'Is that what I aspire to? Do I want to be like them?' But I had the feeling that something was still missing. Despite my admiration, I couldn't help noticing that the mastery such people possessed in their particular field was often not matched by even the simplest human perfections – like altruism, goodness, or sincerity. On the other hand, those films and photographs gave me a glimpse of something quite different, which drew me to those Tibetan masters. Their way of being seemed to reflect what they taught. So I set out to find them.

Another friend of mine, Christian Bruyat, had the same feeling of something suddenly clicking into place. He was preparing for his entrance exam to teachers' training college when he heard the last words of a radio broadcast in which Arnaud Desjardins was saying something like, 'I believe that the last great wise men, living examples of spiritual perfection are now the Tibetan lamas who have taken refuge in the Himalayas of India.' At that very moment he, too, decided to set out on the journey to see them.

So I left on a cheap flight to India. I could hardly speak any English. You'd felt it was more important for me to learn German, Greek, and Latin, all more difficult than English which you told me, I'd learn naturally anyway. It turned out you were right – but in the meantime I've forgotten all my German and the rest. I arrived in Delhi with a little pocket dictionary and had the greatest trouble managing to find my way, buy a railway ticket for Darjeeling and get myself there, just across from the most beautiful Himalayan snow peaks. I had the address of a Jesuit father with whom Dr. Leboyer had left a sum of money to help support a great Tibetan Buddhist lama, Kangyur Rinpoche, who had arrived in India a few years earlier. He was then living in great simplicity with his family in a little wooden hut, together with all the books he'd saved from Tibet. It happened that the very day after I arrived, this master's son was to come to the mission. So it was Kangyur Rinpoche's son who took me to meet his father. I stayed there, simply in his presence, for the next three weeks. It left a deep and unforgettable impression on me. He was a man of seventy, radiating goodness and compassion, sitting with his back to a window that looked out over a sea of clouds, through which Kanchenjunga rose up sheer and majestic to an altitude of more than twenty-four thousand feet. I sat opposite him all day long, and had the impression that I was doing what people call 'meditating', in other words simply collecting myself in his presence. I received a few words of teaching, almost nothing. His son, Tulku Pema Wangyal, spoke English, but I could hardly understand a word. It was his person, his being, that made such an impression on me; the depth, strength, serenity, and love that emanated from him and opened my mind.

Thereupon, I continued my travels. I went to Kashmir. I fell ill in India, got typhoid, and set off back home. Stopping over in Damascus, I got off the plane, telling myself how stupid it would be not to see all those countries, and continued by rail and road. I saw the tomb of the great Sufi saint Ibn Arabi, the Krak des Chevaliers, the mosques of Istanbul. I ended my journey hitchhiking to the Abbaye de Tournus, where I meditated in the cool of the cloister, peaceful and deserted, while outside the traffic of August holidaymakers returning home was clogging up the main roads. Finally, worn out, I caught a train to Paris. So that journey was for me, a huge physical upheaval and a great inner revelation. It was only after getting back from India, during my first year at the Institut Pasteur, that I realized how important that meeting with my teacher had been. That special quality of his kept coming back to my mind all the time. I became aware that I'd found a reality that could inspire my whole life and give it direction and meaning, even if I still couldn't say exactly how.

*J.F.* – So you could say that this major change you went through – to avoid using the word 'conversion' prematurely – was not brought about by any increase in intellectual, doctrinal or philosophical knowledge about Buddhist texts as such, but mainly and initially through a personal encounter.

*M.* – Exactly. I only started studying quite a bit later.

*J.F.* – At the time, there were a lot of young Westerners, European and American, traveling in India, weren't there?

*M.* – Yes. It was a year before May 1968. All those people were looking for something different. Some were there to smoke marijuana, some were on a spiritual quest, visiting Hindu ashrams; others were exploring the Himalayas. Everyone was looking for something here, there, and everywhere. Ideas and information were being exchanged all the time: 'I met such-and-such an extraordinary person there ... I saw this amazing landscape in Sikkim ...

met this or that master of music in Benares ... this or that yoga teacher in south India,' and so on. It was a time when everything was being questioned, everything was being explored – not only in books but in reality.

*J.F.* – And of the young Westerners who had gone looking for a new spiritual life, did a large number go to Darjeeling?

*M.* – At the time, very few. Perhaps a few dozen during the late sixties. Then, as time went on, interest in the Tibetan lamas and their teaching gathered pace. A few of the younger generation of Tibetan teachers had already settled in Europe and America during the sixties and it was around 1971 that for the first time some of the great lamas of the older generation started to travel in the West too. Little by little, hundreds and then thousands of Westerners began to study Tibetan Buddhism. A number of those Westerners spent several years in the Himalayas with their Tibetan teachers, or went to visit them regularly.

To return to your earlier point, my interest wasn't based on any study of Buddhism, either on my first journey or on the two or three following trips. It was to meet my teacher again that I went back to India. For sure, I received some essential spiritual instructions from him but never a continuous course on Buddhism. He told me, 'There are a lot of very interesting things in Buddhism, but it's important not to lose yourself in purely theoretical book study. It might distract you from practice, which is the very heart of Buddhism and all inner transformation.' In his presence, however, I'd intuitively discovered one of the basic things about the teacher-disciple relationship, putting one's mind in harmony with that of the teacher. It's called 'mixing your mind with the teacher's mind', the teacher's mind being wisdom and our mind being confusion. What happens is that by means of that 'spiritual union' you pass from confusion to wisdom. This purely contemplative process is one of the key points of Tibetan Buddhist practice.

*J.F.* – But to have what you call wisdom, then, means to have been initiated into a religious doctrine.

*M.* – No, it's the result of an inner transformation. What's called wisdom in Buddhism is the elucidation of the nature of the phenomenal world, of the nature of the mind. What are we? What is the world? In the end, and above all, it's the direct contemplation of absolute truth beyond all concepts. That's wisdom in its most fundamental aspect.

*J.F.* – So it's the philosophical question *par excellence!*

*M.* – Exactly.

*J.F.* – Or at any rate, the philosophical question as it was up until the invention of science in other words as long as philosophy thought it knew everything. Philosophies from classic times until the birth of modern physics in the seventeenth century covered knowledge of the material world, knowledge of the living world, morals, knowledge of man himself and knowledge of the beyond, of the divinity – whether the divinity was seen as personal, as by Aristotle, or as being Nature itself, as by the Stoics or Spinoza. From then onward, an overall doctrine of reality as a whole has no longer been considered seriously attainable. We'll come back to that.

What's more, the word 'wisdom' has another slant. I'll call it the Socratic outlook. For Socrates, wisdom is the consequence of science. For him, there can be no such thing as instinctive wisdom or morality. Everything comes from knowledge, so both must be derived from science. The classical philosophies were philosophies in which access to a certain form

of wisdom and well-being, which they called the 'sovereign good' – meaning to reach a sort of full equilibrium by identifying yourself with virtue in relation to others and with well-being for yourself – flowed from scientific knowledge, or from what they considered to be scientific knowledge. Isn't that a bit what characterized Buddhism, too, at the time you discovered it? Your teacher told you that wisdom is to recognize the ultimate nature of things, but if I may say so wisdom in those terms is quite a vast program. It would include at the same time knowledge of all phenomena in the external world, in yourself, and perhaps in the supernatural world, too.

*M.* – Well, it's true that Buddhism includes the study of traditional sciences, such as medicine, language, grammar, poetics, astronomical or astrological calculation (especially of eclipses), handicrafts, and the arts. Tibetan medicine, which is based on a complex knowledge of healthy physiology and the many internal and external factors that can unbalance it, requires many years of study. Tibetan doctors even had considerable surgical skills, being capable, so it's said, of removing cataracts with the help of a golden scalpel. Although some of their more specialized expertise (including that particular skill) has now been lost, a very sophisticated knowledge of the pharmacology of natural substances remains a basic requirement for all Tibetan doctors. This is certainly one example of knowledge applied to the benefit of others.

But the most important science is knowledge of oneself and of reality, the essential question being, 'What is the nature of the phenomenal world, and of the mind,' and on a practical level, 'What are the keys to happiness and to suffering? Where does suffering come from? What is ignorance? What is spiritual realization? What is perfection?' Such discoveries are what can be called knowledge, or wisdom.

*J.F.* – And is the initial motivation to escape from suffering?

*M.* – Suffering is the result of ignorance, so it's ignorance that has to be dissipated. And ignorance, in essence, is belief in a truly existing self and in the solidity of phenomena. To ease the immediate sufferings of others is a duty, but it's not enough; suffering's very cause has to be put right. But, once again, none of this was clear to me at that time. I thought to myself, 'There's no smoke without fire. When I see my teacher, his physical appearance, the way he speaks, what he does, what he is – it all makes me feel utterly convinced that there's something essential here that I want to go deeper into. Here's a real source of inspiration and of certainty, a perfection I want to absorb myself.' Over the course of several journeys (I made five or six trips to India before going to live there), I realized that while I was with my teacher I could easily forget the Institut Pasteur and everything about my life in Europe – but while I was at the Institut Pasteur my thoughts would always be flying off to the Himalayas. So I took a decision that I've never regretted since: to go and live where I wanted to be!

By then I'd finished my thesis and Professor Jacob was thinking of sending me to the United States to work on a new subject of research. Like many researchers at the time, he had switched from studying bacteria to animal cells, a much wider field of research, which was giving quite a boost to progress in biology. I said to myself that I'd concluded a chapter. I had published papers about my five years of research. I hadn't wasted the investments of all kinds that had been made in me, by my family for my education and by François Jacob who had taken me into his laboratory. Whatever happened, it was going to be a turning point in my research anyway. I was free to take another direction without breaking anything off, without



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