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BOOKS & ARTS

Meditating on consc

Two books exploring the relationship between Buddhism and science, and how that insights into the brain may come from studying

Buddhism and Science: A Guide for the Perplexed

by Donald S. Lopez

University of Chicago Press: 2008, 280 pp.
\$25, £13

Mind and Life: Discussions with the Dalai Lama on the Nature of Reality

by Pier Luigi Luisi, with Zara Houshmand

Columbia University Press: 2008, 232 pp.
\$24.95, £14.95

In the troubled relationship between science and religion, Buddhism represents something of a singularity, in which the usual rules do not apply. Sharing quests for the big truths about the Universe and the human condition, science and Buddhism seem strangely compatible. At a fundamental level they are not quite aligned, as both these books make clear. But they can talk to each other without the whiff of intellectual



that science lacks — a tried and tested way of observing and altering, through careful attention to meditation, the subjective workings of the mind. Neuroscientists can show how the practices used by meditators result in physiological changes in the brain, but as several of the Dharamsala conference participants attest in the book, neuroscience does not yet have the tools to explore the various states of consciousness they experience. Buddhism seems to offer a kind of science of introspection.

As a research exercise, the East–West discourse on consciousness sounds harmonious, but at a deep level, it is anything but. Both Luisi and Lopez identify this as an area of great conceptual divergence. Whereas cognitive science's best guess is that consciousness is an emergent property of neuronal organization, Buddhists see it at some pure subtle level as not contingent on matter at all, but deriving instead from “a previous continuum of consciousness” — the

Dalai Lama's words — and has neither begun to test. Furthermore, anyone to grasp such consciousness without there is no way yet that means years of *Mind and Life*: “It's a physicist explaining electromagnetic waves to someone who doesn't know mathematics.”

Despite this, Luisi leaves you with the impression that if cognitive science and Buddhists can learn each other's language, they can. Consciousness as a field, whatever your field, is likely to offer a way you had not tried. This sharp primer into

Seeing is behaving



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