



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

By Jean-Francois Revel, Matthieu Ricard, John Canti, Jack Miles



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Jean Francois-Revel, a pillar of French intellectual life in our time, became world famous for his challenges to both Communism and Christianity. Twenty-seven years ago, his son, Matthieu Ricard, gave up a promising career as a scientist to study Tibetan Buddhism -- not as a detached observer but by immersing himself in its practice under the guidance of its greatest living masters.

Meeting in an inn overlooking Katmandu, these two profoundly thoughtful men explored the questions that have occupied humankind throughout its history. Does life have meaning? What is consciousness? Is man free? What is the value of scientific and material progress? Why is there suffering, war, and hatred? Their conversation is not merely abstract: they ask each other questions about ethics, rights, and responsibilities, about knowledge and belief, and they discuss frankly the differences in the way each has tried to make sense of his life.

Utterly absorbing, inspiring, and accessible, this remarkable dialogue engages East with West, ideas with life, and science with the humanities, providing wisdom on how to enrich the way we live our lives.

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Editorial Review

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The Monk and the Philosopher is a collection of father-son dialogues between Jean-François Revel, a French philosopher and journalist famous for his leadership in protests of both Christianity and Communism, and Matthieu Ricard, his son, who gave up a promising career as a scientist to become a Buddhist monk in the Himalayas. The conversations recorded in this book took place during 10 days at an inn in Katmandu. The range of their subjects is immense: What is Buddhism? Why does it have such appeal to many in the West? Why do Buddhists believe in reincarnation? What are the differences between Buddhist and Christian monastic life? How do science and individualism make authentic Buddhist practice difficult for Westerners to achieve? Despite the simplicity of many of these questions, Revel and Ricard never give simplistic answers. Their discussions are rich without being dense, and, even more notably, they take every question very personally. The result is a book perfectly suited as an introduction to the elements of Buddhist religion (with a good bit of Tibetan history thrown in) that is also an excellent description of what it has been like for one man (Ricard) to practice Buddhist faith. However, as Ricard wisely notes at the end of this book, "No dialogue, however enlightening it might be, could ever be a substitute for the silence of personal experience, so indispensable for an understanding of how things really are." The greatest strength of *The Monk and the Philosopher* may be its power to return readers to careful attention to the way we pass our days. --Michael Joseph Gross

From Publishers Weekly

French philosopher Revel (Without Marx or Jesus) and his son, Tibetan Buddhist monk Ricard, engage in a dazzling intellectual tete-a-tete on metaphysics, morality and meaning. In 1972, Ricard abandoned a promising career in molecular biology and announced his intention to study with Tibetan Buddhist lamas in Asia. Initially, Revel was disappointed with his son's decision to study Buddhism, for, as an atheist, Revel had never taken Buddhism or any other religion very seriously. He and Matthieu remained close, and father and son began a series of conversations about the different and common ways that philosophy and Buddhism describe humanity's search for meaning. The dialogues recorded in this book took place in 1996 in Hatiban, Nepal, "a peaceful spot high up on a mountainside above Kathmandu." The give-and-take between these two lively thinkers ranges from the differences between religious and secular spirituality, "faith, ritual and superstition," and Buddhist metaphysics and the philosophy of mind, and on the violence in the Chinese occupation of Tibet. Each conversation covers an astonishing range of history and philosophy from the pre-Socratics in the West to the current Dalai Lama in the East. Revel concludes from these conversations that the East can provide a system of wisdom or ethics for a West where the triumph of science has largely eradicated these systems. Ricard concludes that Buddhism does provide a "science of the mind" that deals with the "basic mechanisms of happiness and suffering." Although these talks reveal little new about either Western philosophy or Buddhism, they do offer a rare glimpse into the workings of two sparkling intellects. Copyright 1999 Reed Business Information, Inc.

From Library Journal

This wonderful book is a dialog between two intelligent and highly educated people who happen to be father and son. Revel, the father, is a French philosopher. Ricard had a promising career in molecular biology but left it to become a Tibetan Buddhist monk. Revel's knowledge of Buddhism is limited as the conversation begins, but the questions he raises are those any intelligent modern person would have. Ricard is articulate and well informed, and his answers are a marvelous introduction to Buddhist thought. Some of the issues examined include why the son went from scientific research to spiritual quest, whether Buddhism is a

religion or a philosophy, Buddhism and the West, the Buddhist concept of death, and the relation of Buddhism and psychoanalysis. The book not only operates at a high intellectual level but also takes on a personal note as father and son explore each other's thoughts. Highly recommended. David Bourquin, California State Univ., San Bernardino
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Users Review

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