

---

## Book Review

---

Pier Luigi Luisi, with Zara Houshmand, *Mind and Life: Discussions with the Dalai Lama on the Nature of Reality* (Columbia Series in Science and Religion; New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), ix + 218 pp., \$24.95 (cloth), ISBN: 0-2311-4550-3. Review doi: 10.1558/jsrnc.v4i2.249.

The Mind and Life dialogues between His Holiness the Dalai Lama, his Tibetan Buddhist contingency, and Western scientists has now been taking place almost annually for over twenty years. During that time, at least a dozen published volumes of the dialogues have appeared from trade and university presses. The volume under review is a summary of the discussion that took place in Dharamsala, India (the home of the Dalai Lama), in late September and early October 2002, on the topic, 'The Nature of Matter, the Nature of Life'.

Luisi, a biologist at the University of Roma Tre, has produced a very accessible account of the conversations. The structure of the week-long dialogue followed the established format of morning presentations by Western scientists who were at least sympathetic to interactions with Buddhists, and afternoon discussions in response. The book thus highlights recent developments in a number of scientific disciplines by Luisi himself, Steven Chu (a physicist from Stanford University), Ursula Goodenough (a biologist from Washington University in St. Louis), and Eric Linder (a geneticist and mathematician at the Whitehead Institute Center for Genome Research), among others. Additionally, the book records the interactions between these presenters and the Dalai Lama and other specially invited guests, in particular Michel Bitbol (a philosopher at the University of Paris), Matthieu Ricard (a Buddhist monk with a PhD in cellular genetics), Arthur Zajonc (a physicist at Amherst College and author of another volume on Mind and Life Dialogue XI), Thupten Jinpa (His Holiness' translator who also has a PhD in religious studies), and B. Alan Wallace (also a regular interpreter for His Holiness as well as an expert on consciousness studies and the Tibetan Buddhist tradition). By and large, the dialogical flavor of the event is preserved by Luisi's narrative, although the order of presentation has been adjusted so that the six main chapters move as follows: from the domain of elementary particles to the emergence of complexity, to the complexity of life, to the unfolding of life, to the human genome, and finally, to the domain of consciousness. In each case, however, the fundamental metaphysical and ontological questions are grappled with, both in terms of Buddhists wrestling with scientific proposals and scientists struggling with whether scientific understandings are compatible with Buddhist convictions.

Readers of *JSRNC* will appreciate this book at a number of levels. Those interested in getting current on discussion in the disciplines of physics, biology, and psychology vis-à-vis the 'nature of reality' will come away with a solid perspective on where

consensus has been achieved and where matters are still under dispute. Others focused on the interface between Eastern philosophic and religious traditions and Western science will find this a valuable introduction to the Mind and Life dialogues and perhaps be inspired to read the other volumes on the dialogues (these are listed at the end of the book). Last, but certainly not least, philosophers, scholars of religion, and informed lay people engaged in the quest to understand the nature of reality will certainly benefit from the frank exchanges preserved in this book.

One example should suffice to provide a sense of how the dialogue unfolded and of the volume's contents. For the most part during the first few chapters, it appeared as if there was little about which the Tibetan contingent and the Western scientists disagreed—the latter would present their scientific perspectives and the former would probe and get clarification about various more technical matters. About one third of the way through the book, however, the issue of consciousness was raised, which was a harbinger of things to come in the second half of the volume. Whereas the scientists by and large were comfortable understanding consciousness as an emergent and complex phenomenon that was nevertheless constituted by—if not reducible to—brains, bodies, and their material components, the Tibetans were fairly unanimous in insisting on the distinction between what they called the *gross* and the *subtle* consciousness, with the former based on and derived from bodily elements, but with the latter conditioned by the brain but not subordinate under and perhaps even ontologically prior to the material forms of life. While the Buddhists seemed divided about whether the subtle consciousness was interdependent with or altogether independent of the material world, they were united in viewing the relationship between the subtle consciousness and the material world at least as 'a form of dualism' (here I am quoting His Holiness, on p. 181). This explains not only how consciousness survives bodily death (not necessarily in a personal form) for reincarnation in another life, but also the Tibetan Buddhist conviction regarding the beginninglessness of the world. Of course, the Tibetan Buddhists provided reasons for their views, even if most of these were of metaphysical varieties that are typically unconvincing to scientists. At the same time, the Westerners were reminded of the hard mystery of consciousness as a first person experience, which continues to resist scientific explication.

The volume repeatedly, however, highlights the important ethical horizon within which Tibetan Buddhists approach the sciences: the goal of learning and even scientific work is shaped by the need to reduce the suffering of the world's sentient beings. Thus the chapter on the human genome is replete with Western scientific appeals to the Tibetans to enter into the complicated and conflicted ethical discussions pertaining to the technological possibilities now available to the human race. The clear consideration of this cultural issue at the present time in human history is itself worth the price of this book.

Amos Yong  
Regent University School of Divinity  
ayong@regent.edu