

## An Interview with B. Alan Wallace

From Columbia University Press, <http://www.cupblog.org/?p=2614>

*The following is an interview with B. Alan Wallace, author of *Meditations of a Buddhist Skeptic: A Manifesto for the Mind Sciences and Contemplative Practice coming out Fall 2011.**

*In this interview Wallace reflects on some of the major ideas and themes that have informed his work. And for the time being, you can read some of his other works*

[Mind in the Balance: Meditation in Science, Buddhism, and Christianity](#), [Hidden Dimensions: The Unification of Physics and Consciousness](#), [Contemplative Science: Where Buddhism and Neuroscience Converge](#), and [Buddhism and Science: Breaking New Ground](#).

**Question: How does *Meditations of a Buddhist Skeptic* differ from your previous books?**

**B. Alan Wallace:** In this new book I synthesize many of the themes addressed in my earlier works, but I also focus more clearly on specific issues such as areas of confrontation and collaboration between Buddhism and science, the role of semantic information and meaning in the natural world, human nature, the question of free will, a Buddhist model of mental health, Buddhist methods of attentional training and contemplative inquiry, and the role of skepticism in Buddhism and how it may help break down ideological barriers that currently inhibit the scientific imagination. All too often, skepticism is applied only to others' beliefs, but a central theme of Buddhism is that it is our own false beliefs and assumptions that lie at the root of our own unrest and discontent. So the primary focus of our skepticism should be inwardly directed, rather than aimed at other's beliefs. My own encounter with Buddhism and science has helped me enormously in this regard, and I hope this book will likewise be of service to others in their open-minded pursuit of greater understanding.

**Q: How did your background in science inform your experiences as a Buddhist monk?**

BAW: My background in science traces back to my education when I was 13 years old and was deeply inspired by a science teacher to devote my life to the study of ecology and wildlife biology. This was my aim during my high school years and during the first two years of university education. Then at the age of 20, my interests turned more toward Buddhist philosophy and meditation, and a year later I left university and for the next 13 years devoted myself to the study and practice of Tibetan Buddhism, first in India and later in Europe and America. But the spirit of open-minded inquiry, skepticism of commonly accepted beliefs and assumptions, and the emphasis on experiential investigation—which are the great strengths of science at its best—has powerfully influenced my engagement with Buddhism. Here for the first time I found a spiritual tradition that welcomed such pragmatism, constructive skepticism, and empiricism. So this allowed me to unite my scientific interests and spiritual aspirations.

**Q: How do you characterize your skepticism?**

BAW: I aspire to the skepticism of the Buddha, who challenged many of the religious and philosophical assumptions of his era. But he wasn't satisfied to remain a mere agnostic but

rather devoted himself wholeheartedly to probing the nature of existence through his own personal experience, refined through the use of highly advanced contemplative training. I likewise idealize the skepticism of Galileo and William James, both of whom challenged many of the commonly held beliefs of their times and responded to them in radically empirical ways. So my approach to science and to Buddhism is one of radical empiricism, tempered by the use of rigorous logic. That is my ideal, but I'm sure I often fail to live up to it fully.

**Q: Physicist Steven Weinberg has stated that he believes science is corrosive to religious belief. How do you think these two disciplines can be better integrated?**

BAW: When Western thinkers refer to "religious belief," they almost invariably refer to the beliefs of the Abrahamic religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Our Western notion of "religion" is virtually defined by these three traditions, each one of which unequivocally fits in our category of "religion" as opposed to "philosophy" or "science." Religion, as we have defined it on our own terms and within the context of Western civilization, is primarily based on divine authority; whereas science as we have defined it within the context of Western civilization is based on empirical evidence and reason. Over the past 400 years, advances in science have indeed often challenged or overthrown religious beliefs. For all of us who are fundamentally committed to the pursuit of truth, and not just the defense of our beliefs and assumptions, such advances are to be welcomed. As I have argued in my first book published with Columbia University Press, [Buddhism and Science: Breaking New Ground](#), it is a fundamental error to classify Buddhism solely as a "religion," for it has always included philosophical and scientific elements as well. So if scientific discoveries repudiate certain Buddhist beliefs, this is a constructive contribution to Buddhism. But scientists should also be open to the possibility that contemplative discoveries by Buddhists may be corrosive to certain scientific beliefs. And they should be as open to this possibility as progressive Buddhists are to being corrected by scientific discoveries.

**Q: Have you ever run into problems as a scientist because of your belief in Buddhism, or vice versa?**

BAW: Over the past 18 years, I have participated in a number of scientific research projects focusing on the effects of meditation. Almost all the cognitive scientists I have collaborated with are committed materialists, so this has led to many lively conversations and debates about the nature of the mind and its relation to the body. But these encounters have not been problems but have rather been, for the most part, intellectually challenging. For we are all in the pursuit of truth, and as we approach these questions from different viewpoints and using different methods of inquiry, our dialogues have often been mutually constructive and enjoyable. Occasionally I encounter closed-minded, dogmatic scientists and philosophers, and conversations with them are generally futile. I have also encountered closed-minded, dogmatic Buddhists, and conversations with them are equally pointless. Dogmatists of all kinds share the same fundamental mindset, and I have concluded it is based on fear of the unknown and a lack of tolerance for uncertainty.

**Q: What is the flaw in science's reliance on materialism?**

BAW: The great strength of science since the time of Galileo has been its focus on rigorous observation of objective, physical, quantitative phenomena, together with ingenious methods of experimentation, followed by sophisticated mathematical analysis. The enormous progress made by the physical and biological sciences over the past 400 years, in comparison to a lack

of comparable progress in philosophy and the mind sciences has resulted in a profoundly imbalanced picture of reality as a whole. Since we scientifically know so much about the objective physical world and so comparatively little about the subjective mental world, there is a natural inclination simply to equate mysterious subjective mental phenomena, including consciousness itself, with more easily understood physical phenomena, such as brain processes. The role of the mind in nature is thus marginalized, and human nature is reduced to biological mechanisms. This tendency is both dehumanizing and demoralizing, and its effect on human civilization is disastrous. The materialistic worldview is inextricably tied to hedonistic values and consumerism as a way of life, and this triad is destroying our planet and deteriorating human values. It is imperative that science be freed from the intellectual and methodological straightjacket of materialism and adopt a radically empirical approach to the study of the mind and consciousness, as proposed by William James and as practiced by Buddhism at its best.

**Q: Do you envision your book influencing Western scientists?**

A: Western scientists and others who are utterly committed to a materialistic worldview may not be drawn to my book, for it challenges many of their most cherished assumptions; and none of us feels comfortable when our basic beliefs are called into question. But for those who are open-minded, I hope this book will open new vistas of understanding, showing how cutting-edge scientific thinking and empirical research may interface in fruitful ways with the most sophisticated theorizing and experiential inquiry presented in Buddhism. The collaboration between these two great, ancient traditions of knowledge may benefit both by casting a bright light on their respective strengths and weaknesses, so that each may be enhanced by the other.