

Rationally Speaking #194: Robert Wright on "Why Buddhism is True"

Julia Galef: Welcome to Rationally Speaking. The podcast where we explore the borderlands between reason and nonsense. I'm your host Julia Galef and I'm here with today's guest Robert Wright.

Robert is an author of several best selling books, including "The Moral Animal," which I read years ago and found very influential. Also, "Non Zero," and "The Evolution of God," which was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize. We're going to talk today about Robert's most recent book, "Why Buddhism is True: The Science and Philosophy of Mediation and Enlightenment."

Bob, welcome to the show.

Robert Wright: Well thanks for having me.

Julia Galef: It's great to have you on. You know, the theme of a lot of my podcasts, and a lot of my life honestly, is trying to grapple with -- what is rationality?, is it good?, is it feasible? All of your oeuvre together is this important piece of that puzzle. So, I'm so glad we could finally have you on the show.

Robert Wright: I'm not gonna ask you if it's an example of rationality or the other side of the line, but-

Julia Galef: Hopefully that will emerge at some point into the next 40 minutes.

Robert Wright: We'll keep people on the edge's of their seats.

Julia Galef: So, Bob, the title of your book, "Why Buddhism is True" – let's not go any further before we unpack what that's in fact claiming. So, you're not talking about the entirety of Buddhism, all the claims made by Buddhism as a religion, right? You're talking about a subset.

Robert Wright: Right. There are a lot of questions you could ask about that title, some of them hostile. I've heard many of them. It is kind of asking for trouble. It sounds-

Julia Galef: Was that your publisher's idea?

Robert Wright: You know, it wasn't. It popped into my head and I knew my publisher would love it because I'm the one who's on the firing line right?

Julia Galef: Exactly.

Robert Wright: I mean, publishers love, arguably, hyperbolic titles. I mean, I would actually-

Julia Galef: I've noticed that with headlines as well, in articles... You know they always say that the editors choose the headlines, not the authors. That's true, but at

the same time, it does kind of benefit the author for their article to get a lot of clicks based on the hyperbolic headline. So I don't know how unwilling the participants are.

Robert Wright: Yeah, my policy on headlines is to not ask. I just want to have plausible deniability.

Julia Galef: There you go.

Robert Wright: But with a book title, you do have to sign off on it. I'm willing to defend this one.

Julia Galef: Right.

Robert Wright: But, it's, yeah, it's first of all not the supernatural part of Buddhism I'm defending. It's not about, you know, rebirth, reincarnation.

It's about what you could call the naturalistic part. It's sometimes called secular Buddhism; I'm a little ambivalent about that. But, in any event it's the part of Buddhism you could evaluate from the standpoint of modern psychology, modern philosophy.

That's what I try to do. I kind of focus on what I think of is, in a way, the core claim of naturalistic Buddhism, which is that the reason we suffer and the reason we make other people suffer is that we don't see the world clearly. We have major illusions about ourselves, about others and if you dispel those illusions, or at least get closer to seeing reality, you can become happier and you can become a better person.

That's the way I put it, and so there's kind of a diagnosis of the human predicament in Buddhism. We do suffer, and then there's a prescription as well. You know, a way to clarify your vision and so to suffer less. That path includes meditation. I've done a certain amount of meditation. But I'm defending both the diagnosis, and the prescription basically.

Julia Galef: Great. So, I don't know a lot about Buddhism personally, but my impression and my assumption a priori would be that from the perspective of Buddhists and the originators of Buddhism -- all of those things, the naturalistic parts and the supernatural parts, they see as part of one framework. So, I guess I'm wondering if it should give us pause to say that all of these naturalistic parts are right. Despite the fact that all these other claims and their framework, about reincarnation, are completely false.

Should we consider that a little bit weird, or surprising, or coincidental? That a framework that is not, sort of, epistemologically sound -- in the sense of it produces all these, sort of, false supernatural claims -- is somehow giving rise to all of these really true important facts about psychology?

Robert Wright:

Well, I would call the naturalistic and supernatural parts of Buddhism closely integrated but logically separable. So, for example on the naturalist side there's a lot of emphasis on the role of craving -- or tanha, as it's called in Buddhism -- in leading us to recurring states of dissatisfaction. You know, you crave these things and you kind of have this feeling that the gratification will last, and it kind of doesn't. So you want more, so this kind of unsatisfactoriness is built into us.

Now, that's a claim about human psychology that I think is actually corroborated by the logic of natural selection, of evolutionary psychology. I think it makes sense that we would be recurrently dissatisfied animals, for reasons I could get into.

But the point for now is that this tanha, this craving has to cease in order for you to be liberated from the round of rebirth -- according to the supernatural part of Buddhism. Because this craving is kind of the energy that propels you into the next life cycle. Although, there are technical problems with saying "you" get propelled, because technically you don't exist. But I don't want to get too deep into the weeds here.

The point is it is a tightly integrated system, on the one hand. And yet, you can look at the naturalistic claims in isolation, I think, and I think they're very impressive ... They have an impressive kind of record of being astute and on target given the fact that a lot of this stuff developed a couple thousand years ago. Or even longer ago.

Julia Galef:

Yeah, I mean, well that is kind of my point actually. That I, I mean I agree with you as will probably become apparent as we talk more about those claims. I agree with you that a lot of those claims seem surprisingly astute. It's the "surprisingly" part that I'm pointing at. It's almost like if I talked to, like, an astrologer or a self-professed psychic, and they said a lot of true things about my life. Or, I don't know, about science or finance or something. They're not logically wrong, just because they are an astrologer or a self-professed psychic. But, I would just be sort of surprised. Like -- how are you getting this right? You know?

Robert Wright:

It is kind of surprising. I mean, especially when you see that Buddhist psychology going back millennia, I think anticipated some things that modern psychology is only really now appreciating. Such as how tightly intertwined affect and cognition are. So how feelings tend to accompany thoughts and perceptions, and even shape them.

If you ask, well, why did they get the picture so early? My theory is that -- you know, meditation was a well-developed practice. It preceded Buddhism in what you could call Hinduism, I guess. One kind of meditation, you could say that mindfulness meditation fits this pattern. That's the main kind I've done and the main kind I talk about in the book. It involves kind of quieting the mind, getting it to a point where you can observe the inner workings of your mind with what is, in a way, more objectivity or detachment than usual.

Julia Galef: Mm-hmm.

Robert Wright: I personally, I mean I'm not a great meditator, but I do have a daily practice. But when I go on retreats, so like a one week, two week silent meditation retreat, I see that you really can get your mind into a state where you start seeing things about its internal dynamics that you hadn't seen before. Not like crazy hallucinations. They seem to be things about the structure of thought and of feeling, and of the connection between the two. I think it's at least plausible that an acute kind of introspection is facilitated by certain meditative technics. And that accounts for some of the early insights in Buddhism into how the mind works. At least that's my best working theory.

Julia Galef: I see. So these are, maybe, unlike other empirical truths about the world. Like, about fundamental physics, say. Or, truths that you would need a lot of data, and sort of, good statistical tools to unearth. These are truths that are there to be uncovered with, sort of, good introspection and reflection. The Buddhists, or their immediate predecessors just happened to have put in an unusual amount of work developing those tools of introspection, that other people kind of didn't, so that's why they got there.

Robert Wright: That's the idea. And of course, strictly speaking, this is not scientific data because it's not publicly observable. Nobody can see what I'm seeing when I meditate other than me. On the other hand, phenomenology, the description of subjective experience from within, is a part of Western philosophy that is considered legitimate and is thought to possibly shed real light on the workings of the mind. So, you know ... I wouldn't call this part of Buddhism scientific. I would say, though, that the fact that some of the observations that have come out of it seem to comport well with what science is suggesting speaks highly of it.

Julia Galef: Yeah, actually that was gonna be my next question. If these important truths about human psychology and the human condition are detectable just through introspection, then what has modern science added beyond what we were already able to discern with introspection? Like, what is cognitive science contributing?

Robert Wright: Well, a good example is kind of changing views of what exactly the conscious self is and does.

Julia Galef: Hmm.

Robert Wright: I mean, I think the intuition that humans naturally have as they just go about their lives, is that the conscious self is this kind of CEO. I'm the one thinking the thoughts, making the decisions. I'm in charge. "I" being the conscious self.

Doubt has been cast on that going back decades. Including the so-called split brain experiments where they did these experiments on people whose ... The connections between their hemispheres, their cerebral hemispheres, had

been severed. That allowed them to, kind of, give instructions to one side of the brain to, like, do things. The instructions were not accessible to the side of the brain that is reporting about its motivation for doing things.

Julia Galef:

Right.

Robert Wright:

So, you'd say, "Well, get up and start walking." Then you would ask the person, "Why are you walking?" The left hemisphere, which didn't know why it had started walking, would say, "Well I gotta get a soda," or something. There's other data suggesting that people ... The impetus for actions does not always begin with conscious intention. But, we do tend to make up good stories about our motivation, and sometimes actually believe them.

So there's that as data, and different kinds of experiments suggest that. That's very consistent with the Buddhists' idea that the self as we normally think of it doesn't exist. This kind of CEO self. There are doubts about that in very early Buddhist texts.

Then one of the models that has come along in psychology that I think has a lot to be said for it, and is especially, although not only, associated with evolutionary psychology is called the modular model of the mind. The idea here is that the mind consists of a lot of little actors. These are like little, kind of, modules. They're not spatially discrete, I mean they're not ... Any given module would tend to have its functionality distributed over various parts of the brain. But still, you can think of them as modules that have specialties and were probably engineered by natural selection at different times in evolutionary history.

So you might have a module that's in charge of getting you to eat stuff. Then you might have one that's in charge of getting you to, you know, impress people who are worth impressing. If you're at a cocktail party and you're talking to someone but you can kind of see the hors d'oeuvres and you feel a tension there, maybe that is a tension between two modules like this. One trying to get you to do one thing, one trying to get you to do the other. Maybe often the tension between different modules is not consciously perceptible and the conflict between them gets settled at the subconscious level. It's the winning module, so to speak, that is in charge of sending thoughts into your consciousness at any given point.

This is in a lot of ways compatible with Buddhist thinking, and it's compatible with a particular observation you hear from meditation teachers, and advanced meditators. They'll say, "Thoughts think themselves." What they mean by that ... What they mean is if you get your mind to a sufficient state of quiet, and you observe thought, suddenly it doesn't seem like you're generating them, it seems like they're kind of drifting in from left field. You realize that maybe normally the situation is thoughts actually just kinda enter my consciousness from somewhere in my brain and I automatically take ownership with them and assume that I'm the originator of them.

Julia Galef: Mm-hmm.

Robert Wright: But, if you really calm your mind you realize that actually, thoughts are being injected into consciousness. So that's a case of an introspective meditative observation, that's kind of nicely compatible with a model from modern psychology, that I think has a lot to be said for it.

Julia Galef: Got it. So what I'm hearing is, introspection can tell us *that* a phenomenon exists. Like that there's something wrong with our assumption that we are a single unified self, say. Then, science can tell us the *how* and *why*, ideally. Like it can tell us more nitty gritty mechanisms underlying the fact that the self doesn't exist. And can also maybe tell us why the brain is that way, evolutionarily speaking.

Robert Wright: Yeah. I mean I think it can, first of all, corroborate the claim itself that, yeah, it is looking like the conscious self isn't so in control. But then yeah, further it can have a, provide a model that explains what's going on that accounts for this fact. In other words, what is in charge.

Julia Galef: Mm-hmm.

Robert Wright: You know, and also with evolutionary psychology you can take it one level deeper. It can provide an account in principle of how this system came to be created. Why this system exists.

Julia Galef: Great. Okay. Great. So let's now dive into one of the central claims that you cited at the beginning from Buddhism, that you're defending in the book, which is that these false models of the world are one of the main causes of suffering. (Maybe "one of the main" was my hedging words. Maybe you just said the cause of human suffering, I don't remember how strongly you stated it.) But, maybe just give an example to start us off of a kind of delusion.

Robert Wright: The most common sensical example of how natural selection seems capable of explaining an illusion posited by Buddhism -- we'll get to the question later whether you want to consider this a real illusion. But, it's this thing I alluded to earlier -- the fleetingness of gratification. Why does gratification evaporate?

Now, in Buddhism this is considered a kind of misperception or illusion because we don't really come to terms with it. It's like we keep pursuing these things, kind of, half thinking that they will persist. On one level ... If you asked me do I think a powdered sugar donut will bring me eternal bliss, I will say no. Or a promotion, or anything I seek. Or a new smart phone. On the other hand, when you're pursuing these things you are focused, you're thinking about, kind of, the gratification generally. The good part, and not the fact that it will fade and leave you yearning for more.

Julia Galef: Mm-hmm.

Robert Wright: So you can see why Buddhism calls this a kind of misperception. But, in any event it makes perfect sense that it would be engineered into animals because that's what keeps animals pursuing goals. If you imagine an animal that just ate a meal and then said, "Okay I'm good," never gets hungry again, well -- that animal will die. Obviously natural selection wouldn't want those kinds of animals. 'Cause they're not going to live long enough to get their genes into the next generation.

So, that's a kind of example. But, another example is this kind of illusion about the self. So, it makes sense, and again this idea like many in evolutionary psychology and for that matter many in evolutionary biology broadly, it's kind of conjectural. It's not all proven, or all that solidly established. But there are very plausible explanations of why we would have illusions about the extent to which "we" are in control.

Julia Galef: Mm-hmm.

Robert Wright: And the extent to which we have coherent defensible motivations for everything we do. In particular a defensible moral explanation, that's another bias. An illusion that seems built into us. It's certainly wide spread that we all seem to think we're better than average morally. I mean, at least way more than 50% of people report that. Of course, some of them must be wrong.

Julia Galef: Unless there's one person who's just extremely immoral -- he could skew the average so that the rest of us are all above average. Nevermind, sorry, that's just a dumb tangent!

Robert Wright: It may depend on whether we're talking mean, or median here. But, the ... I should also say that they're just, it's pretty clear that natural selection can foster misperceptions just of a very pedestrian sort. Like we tend to overestimate the speed of approaching objects, presumably 'cause it's better to be safe than sorry, better to get out of the way too soon than too late.

Julia Galef: Right.

Robert Wright: So it just makes perfect theoretical sense that natural selection, given that that entire bottom line is genetic proliferation, you know, those traits conducive to genetic proliferation are the traits that will flourish. It makes sense that traits that make us misperceive things could flourish so long as they get genes in the next generation and traits that make us suffer could flourish so long as they get genes in the next generation. That seems to be the case, not just with the fleetingness of gratification, but also just with things like anxieties, fears. They were built to apparently motivate us through suffering, and then in a modern environment they ... The situation gets worse, 'cause so many of them are kind of unproductive in a more, you know, are less defensible as being in any sense productive than they might have been in an environment more like the one we were designed for.

So, there's a lot of, I think a lot of examples of how natural selection makes us suffer and makes us misperceive the world. And I also think that there are connections between those two things, as Buddhism posits.

Julia Galef:

So, you mentioned the modular mind model earlier. One of my recent episodes was with Rob Kurzban who describes the modular mind model in "Why Everyone (Else) is a Hypocrite. And for about a third of that episode I kind of went back and forth with Rob about whether we would in fact be better off if we could reduce these ... Well, I kept wanting to call them self deceptions, but you know he doesn't like the concept of a self, so I wasn't allowed to call it that. But that's what they are, self deceptions or delusions. You know, his whole model, which I think some other scientists or philosophers share is that these delusions are useful still, not just in the evolutionary adaptive environment. Because they have the signaling function where if we think that we're in control, or we're really strong or reliable or virtuous that will help us convince the other people around us that we are those things too. That's strategically useful.

So he just sort of kept -- like, I would give an example of a bias or a delusion, he'd say, "Yes, but that's useful because XYZ." So, do you disagree with him about that? Do you think that these delusions don't serve a useful purpose, sort of, as psychological propaganda or do you just think that yes, they do, but the suffering they cause us outweighs it?

Robert Wright:

I think I largely agree. Rob's interesting because, you know, I taught a seminar a couple years at Princeton on Buddhism and I had him visit the class both times because he's nearby. He's in Penn. I mention him in the book. One interesting thing about him is that he reached his idea that the self doesn't exist, before he was at all conversed in Buddhism, and I think maybe before he knew that Buddhism says the self doesn't exist. I thought that was a fascinating kind of corroboration, you know, when somebody with no knowledge of Buddhism independently reaches the same conclusion.

But as for the ... I'm certainly not denying that various distortions that natural selection might have built into our minds, are in some sense useful in the modern world. I guess I'd say a couple of things.

I mean, first of all some are just manifestly not. Like, certain forms of public speaking anxiety. I mean, evolutionary psychologists would say that anxiety is natural. It's natural to worry about what people think of you because apparently being held in esteem was, during evolution, correlated with getting genes in the next generation. But we are not "designed" by natural selection, you know, to speak to large groups of people we've never met before. In other words that was not part of the environment in which anxiety evolved. So it's not surprising that that freaks people out way beyond any utility it might have. I mean if you're so freaked out you can't sleep the night before a talk, you know, then that's not good. I think there are a lot of examples like that where anxiety maybe remorse, or self loathing. A lot of things are just not functional in the modern environment.

The other thing I'd say is that some of the things are valuable to people. Like, they facilitate social climbing, say, some of these illusions. But that presupposes that social climbing is itself good for you. That's an argument you could have. I mean, I think Buddhism tends to question things at a pretty fundamental level.

And so it might encourage questioning, "Well, why the relentless pursuit of social status?" I mean I understand why I have it. Status got genes into the next generation, so I have the thirst for that, just like I have the thirst for sweet foods -- which are another thing, by the way, another feature that was more functional back before the invention of modern things like junk food than it is now. That doesn't mean, if upon examination I decide that the quest for status, especially again, in a modern environment that may be different from the one we resign for, if I decide that that's actually not making me happy anyway, then some of these illusions are actually not even useful at that level.

Julia: You talk throughout the book about emotions like anxiety or fear, and you sometimes refer to them as being true or false -- not just being useful or non-useful for achieving happiness, or achieving your goals. How do you decide if an emotion is true?

Robert: Well, there's a couple of definitions I play around with. Feelings originally, presumably -- I mean approach/avoid, which presumably is associated with good feeling/bad feeling, is the most fundamental behavioral decision in life and presumably the oldest. Like, you avoid toxins, predators. You approach food, mates.

You could say, well, if a feeling is true -- feelings are designed to serve the interest of organisms. Strictly speaking, the interest of the genes of the organisms. But if indeed approaching something because it feels good to approach it, leads us to some nutrient that's good for the organism, then you could say, "Okay, that feeling was true." You could have that definition of truth or falseness of a feeling.

Julia: That does seem like "useful" though. Or sorry, that does seem like another way to say a useful or non-useful emotion.

Robert: You could say that, but of course, there's a whole philosophical tradition called pragmatism that asserts that you can think of what's true as being what's useful. I don't really get into that in the book but I just play around in my chapter on feelings.

Let me back up and say the point of that is to kind of, again, get back to this Buddhist claim that we suffer because we don't see the world clearly. The reason I want to provide the backstory on feelings and give people a way of asking themselves, "Wait a second, is this anxiety clarifying my vision or obscuring my vision?" In that sense, you might say, "Is it true or false?"

The reason I want to get people thinking that way is because I want to convince them that actually yes, the kind of happiness of Buddhism promises, does qualify for the label of "Valid happiness", at least in a sense that it is associated with a clearer

view of the world and I think can be associated with a morally clearer view of the world and better moral behavior. That's the reason I go through the exercise of looking at like anxiety and fear and so on.

There is a second sense in which feelings can be false, which is that a lot of these feelings are set to give us false positives. Like if you're taking a hike and you've heard there's rattlesnakes around and you hear rustling in the grass, you're going to feel fear -- and if a lizard darts out, you may well literally think you see a snake for a second. That's just literally false. That's a case of a feeling fostering -- or if you even go, "Oh, I'll bet that's a snake," and don't see the snake, that's a feeling fostering a literal falsehood.

That seems to be designed into us by natural selection because it's better to be scared 99 times when it's not necessary, than fail to be scared the 100th time when the snake fatally bites you. But that's another sense in which feelings can be false. The main point of this is convey to people, look, especially the modern environment, we are suffering because of feelings that are just in no, whatever you want to call it, useful or true, I don't care but there's nothing good to be said about, they're not doing you any good and meditation offers an actual practice for loosening their grip on you for liberating yourself from them to some extent and even a large extent.

I think providing the evolutionary back story can actually help the meditative process. It can give you I think the appropriate sense that feelings should be treated skeptically, you know? You should not assume that they are valid guides to how you should behave. And so I think there's this philosophical value in asking what I mean by a feeling being true or false or whatever, but I also think there's just practical value in deciding which feelings we should trust.

Julia: You talk about how Buddhism and developing the skill of mindfulness can help you make decisions in a more detached way, so you're less subject to influence from emotions that may be false, or un-useful. What do you think about the objection that we *need* emotions in our decision-making to help us really know what our values and priorities are -- and without them, we'd be stunted decision-makers?

Like you've probably read Damasio's work about how patients with brain damage, such that parts of their brain that make them feel emotions when they consider possibilities, patients with damage to those parts of their brain have terrible judgment. Because when they make decisions, they can't viscerally feel what would be a good or bad outcome, so they make horrible, self-destructive choices. Yeah, I guess I'm just interested in how you see that interacting with Buddhism.

Robert: If you had no feelings at all, you would have no preferences. You would have no goals, and in a sense, no values. There are interesting questions that people raise about whether, in principle, if you follow the meditative path all the way to enlightenment and that meant you had kind of in some sense overcome the whole phenomenon of aversion and attraction, or at least any kind of clinging attraction, would you have lost all your values? The philosophical version of that question is, is Buddhism ultimately nihilistic?

I think that's a good, in principle, question, but not a very important practical question, because very few of us are in danger of going so far down the meditative path that it becomes a practical question. Like in terms of whatever your social and political issues are, I am so far from *not* caring about what's going on in politics in America right now. I mean my goal is to calm down enough to pursue what goals I do have wisely.

There's one other point, which is that when you talk to meditatives who have gone way, way, way down the path, people can plausibly claim that they actually walk around with no feeling of self and even don't have self-referential thoughts like, "I want this. I want that" ... These people do continue to function. And they describe it as just being kind of on autopilot. They show up for their appointments, they show up to my seminar and talk to my students, and it seems like a normal set of human aspirations more or less even if they do have an air of detachment about them and don't seem to be desperately seeking anything in particular.

Julia: Have you ever asked them what their aspirations are grounded in? Like why they care about whether those aspirations are satisfied?

Robert: Well, they sometimes make a distinction -- I mean, I think the answer is they have not entirely transcended the whole phenomenon of aversion and attraction, and so they don't qualify as truly enlightened. But a distinction that one of them made to me is that your nerve endings aren't dead. A glass of wine tastes good, but you've dropped the whole story about like, "Oh, this is a really expensive bottle of wine. 1977 was a very good year." You know, all these things that have been shown to delude people by the way.

I mean they've done the experiments where they give people two bottles of wine and what the people don't know is it's the same wine but one of them has this fancy label, the other doesn't. They have shown that people think they like the supposedly more expensive bottle better. And they've done the brain scans showing that certain pleasure centers are actually lighting up, that light up with genuine pleasure. But these brain scan studies also kind of distinguish between two parts of the brain, that kind of bottom up part of pleasure-sensing.

Then the part that seems to bring a narrative to the sensory experience, and further shape the pleasureableness or lack thereof -- and what these people are kind of saying is, that part of the brain it seems, may not be working in them anymore. They've dropped the narrative, and that applies to a lot of the parts of their lives. They've dropped clinging to a particular narrative about themselves in principle. I'm not saying these people have totally dropped it, but-

Julia: Is the ideal to just not to have narratives, to have as little narrative in your perception of the world as possible? Or is it to have the freedom to choose which narratives you employ, and therefore only be able to choose the narratives that enrich experiences?

Robert: I would say that the early parts of the meditative path -- and I'm afraid, those are the only parts I have personal experience with, except for kind of brushes with deeper

experience that I've had on meditation retreats. But with my daily practice, I would say, what it allows you to do is replace a bad story with a more wholesome one. Like replace, "I'm the one who's always screwing up," with a different story. It gives you, in a certain sense, it gives you enough space around your feelings to kind of build another narrative but at a deeper level.

I remember a meditation teacher on one of my retreats saying to me that, "You know, in a way, if you look at what cognitive behavioral therapy does, it convinces people that the sources of their anxiety are just not logical. They don't hold up to logic and they need to find a better story."

It's like the narrative that you're going to screw up at this public speaking event is false, find a better narrative. He said, "That's fine, it works, it's fine," and I would say that's kind of characteristic of the early stages of meditation. He said, "But you can get to the point where you are just beyond stories," and I unfortunately, don't know what that's like, but he could plausibly claim to have and in some ways I envy him.

Julia: Yeah, I wanted to say I really appreciate the way that you talk about, in the book, about your personal experiences with meditation -- because you're *so* not a natural meditator. And to my listeners who haven't read the book, I'm not being mean. He's very clear and explicit about that in the book. But I appreciate it because I'm also not a natural meditator. Not that I've tried all that hard, but when I did try, it did not come easy to me.

This is sort of like, it's like being shown around an exotic world, by a guide who's from my world and can appreciate how exotic it is, instead of being of the world himself, you know?

Robert: It is exotic, and I take your compliment as a compliment even though one could interpret it another way than-

Julia: It was meant that way.

Robert: Yeah, no you're right. I have attention problems. I'm not a good meditator -- but if I can do it, I think almost anybody can.

Julia: Can I ask, something that's always confused me about meditation, is -- I've asked people before, what does it get me, basically? A common response I get is, "Look, there's no goal, there's no point. If you approach meditation trying to get something out of it, then you're doing it wrong." And I just don't know how to react, like if there's no point, why should I do it -- but then we go round in circles.

Robert: I think the truth is, you do have a goal. People don't go to meditation retreats because they just stumbled onto them. If you're going to do something that extreme, there's probably a reason.

Julia: Right, but -- you've heard this, right? I'm not crazy?

Robert: Oh sure, they say it all the time.

Julia: Yeah.

Robert: They're right in the sense that if you focus on the goal, it will get on the way of attaining the goal. That's not really a logical contradiction. It's the way we are, that in fact -- sports, if you start thinking about trying to attain your goal and start thinking too hard about trying to make the free throw or trying to throw a strike, it'll get in the way of the goal. We know that this can be true of human behavior, but let's face it, I mean the Buddha said in the first famous sermon, he basically laid out the goal, "Let's try to end suffering."

The fact is, there is a goal, and the fact is also that at least in certain contexts, like, well, you're meditating, the less you think about it, the better. More specifically, and also just the less you beat yourself up because you can't focus on your breath or something, that just tends not to be productive. There are a lot of ways in which a more casual attitude to the practice can pay off.

But I do, I meditate for a reason and I think most people do.

Julia: Yeah, so that makes sense and I'm familiar with the phenomenon of it being counter-productive to focus on your goal -- but I do wish that they would just be more straight forward, in saying like, "Here's the goal, but try not to focus on it when you're meditating." And maybe they think that's less helpful than just claiming there's *not* a goal or something. But that also seems like a bit of a strategic deception that I feel doesn't go well with the whole theme of Buddhism.

Robert: Yeah, I think in their defense, there may be kind of a deeper reason. It isn't just that if you try to calm down through meditation, you'll have more trouble calming down. It's that in a state of mindfulness, it's just like... trying to do anything in particular gets in the way. Like if you feel anxiety, the natural reaction is to try to end the anxiety whereas the guidance in mindfulness meditation is, and I know this sounds a little touchy feeling but -- just be with it. It's good advice. In other words, don't run from it and that's not easy.

I mean we so naturally are always trying. Again, we're built to very often want to be somewhere we're not, or want things to be different than they are. And mindfulness only really works well if you let go of that, at a pretty fine grained level -- so you feel anxiety, and naturally should want to get away from it, but you don't even try, you should try not to try to do that, you know. If that makes any sense.

Julia: Okay, so let me try to summarize what I think is your thesis about delusions or false beliefs about the world: We have a bunch of negative delusions, things like anxiety and fear, that maybe are natural and made sense from an evolutionary perspective, but are definitely not useful or not true now in the modern world. Buddhism can help reduce those.

Then we have these other, sort of, you might want to call them positive delusions, that make us feel good but are actually bad for us in the long run. Or they're not necessarily bad for us, but they help us pursue goals like social climbing, that maybe aren't the optimal goal -- like, wouldn't make us the happiest. Or if we were really

being sort of reflective and careful, we wouldn't choose as our goals. And that's why you also advocate using the tools of Buddhism to reduce those positive delusions as well?

Robert: Yeah, I mean I wouldn't say things like fear and anxiety are always misleading but I would say they often are, especially in a modern environment.

And as for the kind of what you might call positive illusions or in any event the category of illusions that in this case help us navigate the social currents and serve our interests along the social landscape... I don't have a problem with people who want to achieve high status, we all do that to some extent. I mean, I've got a book out. I want it to be highly regarded and I want people to think I'm great, you know? I haven't transcended that, and I'm not convinced that you can't be happy through social advancement. Although I think, the psychologists have shown that the hedonic treadmill, there's a lot of self-negating dimensions of the pursuit of various things at the level of aggregate happiness.

But what I would say is, if we're looking at those kinds of illusions that you navigate the social landscape with, I think you have to factor in the other phenomena aside from your own social advancement that they often lead to like wars and things like that. These are often the same illusions, the moral self-certainty, you know, the self-righteousness. I'm right, they're wrong, my rivals are wrong, my enemies are wrong, my rivals are bad people, my enemies are bad people. That's a great tool for social climbing because you can then say and believe negative things about your rivals and undermine them.

When you start looking at wars that kill millions of people and are fueled by to some extent, the same dynamic, I think you have to add that into the calculus. One reason I wrote the book is because of all the tribalism in the world including political polarization in America and wars and so on.

Julia: Okay, good. This is a good, I had one last question that I wanted to ask you and this is a very nice segue into it: one reason this interview is fun for me is that I get to throw at you all the questions that people throw at me when I advocate for why rationality makes us all better off.

One of the common objections that I get is that irrationality has positive externalities. If for example, I'm starting a start up and I am over confident, I'm way too certain that it's going to succeed when the rational probability that I should have is much closer to 1% or lower... that's bad for me, but it's actually good for the world. Because then we get all these thousands of people starting start ups and one or two of them turn out to be Google or Facebook or something like that.

You could broaden the argument and look at discoverers or innovators or pioneers, people who really change the world. The argument goes, these people are irrational, they're irrationally overconfident and sure of themselves and probably have a bunch of positive illusions -- but they make shit happen. They actually change the world.

And so people making this argument will say, "Maybe it's better for some fraction of the population, maybe even a majority of the population to reduce their delusions -- but if everyone did that then that subset of the population that's changing the world over time, that would drop out and we'd all be worse off."

Robert: Yeah, of course, I mean the idea that we need as much striving as we have in the world for the good of the human species pre-supposes that technological evolution at its current rate is a good thing, whereas you could argue that it's destabilizingly fast.

That aside, look, I think you should always take externalities into account. Also, it's worth acknowledging that illusions are a kind of often benign social lubricant. When you're just doing business with someone, or you find you have a common interest, just perceiving that you can do business in one of these senses tends to give you a favorable view of them that allows you to like them. It warps your perception of them but that's often not a bad thing.

It lets non-zero sum games reach a win-win outcome and that's all great. I'm not on an all-out crusade against illusions. One thing I like about mindfulness meditation is it lets you pick and choose a little. I mean you can observe different feelings and decide which ones you want to get on board with. Now that alone may not get you all the way to enlightenment -- but you know, let's face it, how many of us are going to get all the way or have any realistic aspiration of getting all the way?

I mainly want to give people, I mean I want to show them how meditation can help them get what is sometimes called meta-cognition -- both a better understanding of the forces that are actually influencing their cognition, their decisions, their behavior, and a technique for fiddling with that machinery a little to make themselves happier. I think that will tend, it's not guaranteed to, but I think it will tend to make them better people. To behave better toward their fellow human beings. And I think that's especially likely if it is informed by some kind of ethical system like Buddhism but I think it tends in that direction anyway.

Julia: Great. Well, Bob, before I let you go, I want to invite you to give the rationally speaking pick of the episode. If this is a book or an article or something that has influenced your thinking in some way, what would your pick be?

Robert: Well, a book that I wouldn't particularly, necessarily recommend but if you're asking me did it have a big influence on me ...

Julia: Yes, sorry, that is what I'm interested in.

Robert: When I was in high school, I wasn't hanging out with an especially intellectual group of students, but I did because I guess my brother-in-law was doing graduate work in psychology, I wound up reading B.F. Skinner's "Beyond Freedom and Dignity." It's about do we have freedom, or is in fact all our behavior determined?

He tended to think it was all determined. He was an environmental determinist. He minimized and I think underplayed the role of genes, and so there's a lot in the book

that I might not sign onto now. But there was something about the crisp analytical quality of the inquiry, and the clarity of the writing that really kind of captivated me and I think probably turned him into a kind of role model for me for a while.

Where I just thought it would be cool to like think that clearly and sound that smart, you know.

Julia: Very frank, I love it.

Robert: Yeah, there's a lot, I'm sure if I went back, I wouldn't agree with him but in terms of influence, that book influenced me.

Julia: Wonderful. Well, we'll link to that as well as to your book, "Why Buddhism is True: The Science and Philosophy of Meditation and Enlightenment." Bob, thanks so much for joining us. It was a pleasure having you on the show.

Robert: Thank you, Julia. I really enjoyed the conversation.

Julia: Likewise. This concludes another episode of Rationally Speaking. Join us next time for more exploration on the borderlands between reason and nonsense.