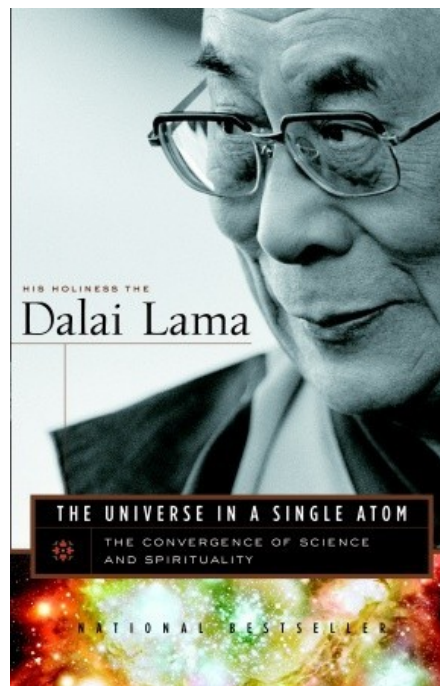




The Universe in a Single Atom: The Convergence of Science and Spirituality

Dalai Lama XIV

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Galileo, Copernicus, Newton, Niels Bohr, Einstein. Their insights shook our perception of who we are and where we stand in the world, and in their wake have left an uneasy coexistence: science vs. religion, faith vs. empirical inquiry. Which is the keeper of truth? Which is the true path to understanding reality?

After forty years of study with some of the greatest scientific minds, as well as a lifetime of meditative, spiritual, and philosophic study, the Dalai Lama presents a brilliant analysis of why all avenues of inquiry—scientific as well as spiritual—must be pursued in order to arrive at a complete picture of the truth. Through an examination of Darwinism and karma, quantum mechanics and philosophical insight into the nature of reality, neurobiology and the study of consciousness, the Dalai Lama draws significant parallels between contemplative and scientific examinations of reality.

This breathtakingly personal examination is a tribute to the Dalai Lama's teachers—both of science and spirituality. The legacy of this book is a vision of the world in which our different approaches to understanding ourselves, our universe, and one another can be brought together in the service of humanity.

The Universe in a Single Atom: The Convergence of Science and Spirituality Details

Date : Published September 12th 2006 by Harmony (first published January 1st 2005)

ISBN : 9780767920810

Author : Dalai Lama XIV

Format : Paperback 224 pages

Genre : Nonfiction, Science, Philosophy, Religion, Buddhism, Spirituality

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Chelsea says

I can't remember the last book I read that so far exceeded my expectations. As soon as I finished the book I flipped right back to the first page and started all over again. I'm about half-way through the second read now, and I still find myself jotting down notes, re-reading passages, and taking long moments to pause and contemplate the profound ideas put forth in this text. I've never read a book by the Dalai Lama before, and to be honest I wasn't expecting him to be all that skilled of a writer--especially given the fact that English is not his first language and that he's writing on the topic of science. He far surpassed my expectations, however, and I thoroughly enjoyed learning about the overlap between modern Buddhist and Scientific perspectives. Given the scope of scientific topics covered in this book-- including cosmology, quantum physics, biological evolution, consciousness, psychology, and even stem cell research-- his holiness was able to speak to the complexity of his subjects in simple, yet comprehensive language. He covered points of intersection and departure between science and buddhism, doing so without reducing ideas upon which the two paradigms seem to disagree to black/white issues. He even addressed the ontological and epistemological underpinnings of both paradigms, noting how scientific reductionism can lead to both positive and negative outcomes. Fantastic read for the scientifically- and spiritually- minded reader alike. Highly recommended!

michael spencer says

Gained on-loan from my Buddhist sister at my own whim, I've found the spirit of the writing very much like what I'd expect: calm, concise, and worth consideration.

Though there are some places where the logic does not come to one readily, the essence is fascinating... almost readily agreeable. Namely, that science and spirituality/religion are never to be seen as opposites, or even enmeshed, but rather interdependent.

Being a Christian myself, with interests in many things religious regardless of "confession", I am struck by the common approach to this subject that I might find from other world religious leaders, such as the Pope or Orthodox Patriarch. A few quotes have already become wanted memories:

"... the highest spiritual ideal is to cultivate compassion for all sentient beings and to work for their welfare to the greatest possible extent."

"[One] of the most memorable meetings during this period [of my exile was] with the Trappist monk Thomas Merton, who had a deep interest in Buddhism and opened my eyes to Christianity..."

The problem is that I expected something more unbiased, and rationally sound. He does a good job comparing the two, but sometimes it sounds as piecemeal and his reasoning is less than the norm. Take it or leave it, my expectations from previous readings garnered this a lower rating than his others.

Silvia GONZALEZ Delgado says

El cosmos budista es visto de otro punto de vista, según ellos primero fuimos seres etéreos, luego comimos materia, tuvimos que defecar y nos salieron órganos, finalmente la comida y el contexto nos hicieron diferentes y de ahí nacen las emociones: la envidia, el amor!! Está padrísimo!!!

Walter says

This was a pretty nice exploration of the intersection of Science and Buddhist religion. The Dalai Lama came at this material from a very humble standpoint and makes that his religion could be greatly improved by approaching it from the standpoint of science (e.g. he admits that Buddhist cosmology is hopelessly archaic and should be replaced with current models).

Interestingly, he also points to some current research where Buddhist monastic disciplines have made contributions to the science of the brain: see PNAS vol. 101 no. 46 p 16369–16373 (2004). This was very nice work.

On the whole it was nice to see a religious leader that was not contemptuous of science and excited to work with scientists to expand our knowledge through sharing wisdom (old and new).

Kush says

'In each atom of the realms of the universe, there exist vast oceans of world systems' - The great Flower Ornament, an ancient Buddhist scripture.

In the book, The Universe in a Single Atom – The Convergence of Science and Spirituality, His Holiness the Dalai Lama explores the fields of science and spirituality. To begin, most people believe there is a distinct difference between science and spirituality and the two cannot co-exist. Despite this, the Dalai Lama suggests the two are confluent. He recognizes and acknowledges the importance of science for humanity and the importance of spirituality for humanity. Even more, he mentions science is vitally important to humanity. But even so, the Dalai Lama mentions that 'science is only one finger of the hand of humanity, [we] must not lose sight of this because humanity may end up serving the interest of science rather than [humanity]. In addition, the Dalai Lama argues that if people hold the notion that science is the basis of all knowledge it may lead to reductionism and nihilism (what he calls scientific materialism). Even though reality is more complex than objective scientific materialism allows and many aspects of human existence such as creativity, values, spirituality lie outside the scope of scientific inquiry. At this point, I will summarize the main points from the book:

-It is often suggested that science uses empirical evidence (methods that 'involve measurement, quantification, and intersubjective verification through repeated experiments') and religion does not. However, similar with science, Buddhism uses reason and empirical investigation. For instance, the Buddha said to accept the Buddhist scriptures not on the basis of reverence towards him. But to test the truth by reasoned examinations and personal experiments.

- 'The samkhya theory of causation says that any effect is a manifestation of what was already there within the cause'

- 'The Vaisheshika theory of universals proposes that the plurality of any one class of objects has a permanent ideal generality that is independent of all the particulars'

-“Theory of emptiness’ – there is not intrinsic or independent value to a thing; basically, everything is interconnected/interdependent.

-Dependent origination. The principle of dependent origination can be understood in three ways. First, all conditioned things and events in the world come into being only as a result of the interaction of causes and conditions. Second, there is mutual dependence between parts and whole. Third, anything that exists and has an identity does so only within the total network of everything that has a possible or potential relation to it (p.64).

-The Indra’s jeweled net (Google it).

-Buddhists and some scientist believe there is not independent objective reality; reality is contingent on the observer (debatable)

-From a Buddhist perspective, the idea that there is a single definite beginning is highly problematic. If there were such an absolute beginning, this leaves only two options. One is theism, which proposes that the universe is created by an intelligence that is totally transcendent, and therefore outside the laws of cause and effect. The second option is that the universe can into being from no cause at all. Buddhism rejects both (p.82).

-The Dalai Lama argues that science can’t answer metaphysical questions, and questions about morality. Science can’t give the totality explanation of human existence. For example, consciousness and altruistic human emotions.

-It is very difficult for science to answer ethically question. These questions are in the realm of philosophy and spirituality.

-In addition, we find these ethical principles at the heart of all major religious traditions
Buddhism is more concerned with the origin of consciousness. Buddhism main concern is to alleviate human beings pain and suffering

-The Buddhist practice of meditation can cultivate positive emotions such as happiness, joy, compassion and diminish negative emotions (has been scientifically proven using EEG). Buddhism argues, that if this is the case (meditation removes negative emotions, etc) – the mind’s essential nature is pure

-Concerning consciousness, science has to move away from 3rd person to 1st person – since consciousness is a subjective experience

-The Dalai Lama concludes that in essence science and spirituality share the same end, which is the betterment of humanity.

Overall, this book was an amazing read and the Dalai Lama is an amazing human being (his sole purpose on earth is to alleviate human suffering - that’s wicked!). I was surprised how vigorous an intellectual training the Dalai Lama went through in his youth years. I admire the position he is taking, it take a lot of courage. I would recommend this book to people who have an interest in science and/or spirituality. To end, this was an incredible book, I will purchase this book (it was a library loan).

Gabija says

A very insightful and meaningful look at the role of ethics (buddhist as well as secular) of science in the current global context. His Holiness presents a very strong argument why ethical responsibilities have "become, for the first time in world history, a matter of survival". I didn't really understand or enjoy several of the essays in this collection but others have a lot of merit to them. The ones on the nature and source of consciousness outlined particularly interesting overlaps between cognitive and neuroscience and the ideas presented by classical buddhist philosophy.

Cassandra Kay Silva says

I find it encouraging that the Dalai Lama is so open to new scientific ideas. Our world is changing at such a rapid rate. The ideas exploding into the field of physics are absolutely revolutionizing the way we view reality. It is interesting to hear some Buddhist commentary on the advancements of our age. I really enjoyed the last bit where he talked about some of the ethical consequences of bio genetic engineering, and was proud that he addressed this issue with such a strong stance for both plants and animals. The eastern way of thinking lends so well to enveloping and including all species of life in the great circle. I always find it concerning when spiritually minded individuals neglect or ignore their more real world thinking selves. Furthermore I think it is a good reminder of the importance of spirituality in the life of the academic. Learning to look at the world from all views brings wholeness and peace.

Christopher Wojcik says

Fresh off of reading books by the likes of Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins, this was an interesting change of scenery.

The Dalai Lama draws comparisons between the disciplines of science and Buddhism. Buddhism, he notes, has many schools of thought and is comfortable with the idea that there can be competing viewpoints and no exclusive claim to the final truth. If one is compelled to engage with spirituality, this seems to be the only sensible mindset.

Less convincingly, he draws parallels between the two as being disciplines of "investigation." As the scientist must test his theories through experiments in the lab, he claims, a Buddhist must examine insights gained through inward contemplation. A nice metaphorical comparison, but science has something of a leg up in its mistrust of "truths" obtained through first person means. It is true that psychology today has moved beyond behaviorism in asserting the reality/importance of mental states and cognitive processes. However, first-person reports fit into a framework which is grounded in reverse engineering the brain and its informational processing. In science, there is no "personal truth," it must be objective and appreciable to everyone.

One of the more interesting notions was the mention of Buddhist monks being willing to undergo brain scans while meditating. It would truly be fascinating to see what insights into the nature of consciousness could come out of this exchange. Ultimately I must admit that my materialist (oh there's that awful word) world view forces me to characterize any of the insight coming out of such experiments as the potential for science learning more with the help of Buddhists rather than science learning a lot FROM Buddhism. Call me narrow minded.

Clearly suffering is part of the human condition, and there may be much spiritual wisdom about how we might cope with it. It is unfortunate that to many it appears such wisdom is only valid if it comes wrapped in superstition.

Check out the article "Killing the Buddha," by Sam Harris for an interesting perspective along these lines.

Laura K says

The author writes with compassion, depth, and frankness. This is not a light and easy read, as the book contains some heavy scientific discussion. His assertion that science and spirituality do not have to be at odds with one another resonates with me. When a religious dogma conflicts with scientific proof, I believe, a religion can prove its strength (and does not show weakness) by acknowledging the expansion of our knowledge base and adjusting accordingly, rather than denying reality or conflicting viewpoints. Since I do not believe in any religion (or any person's) right to attempt to browbeat others into their own interpretation of "truth", but believe that encouraging free thought can only enhance our growth as individuals and as a society, I welcomed this book. It is always very encouraging to read the written word and think to oneself, "YES! I have always believed this and felt it deeply, even as a small child".

Two passages that I am particularly fond of:

1) "...I have always argued that the differences of color, language, religion, ethnicity, and so forth among human beings have no substance in the face of our basic sameness. The sequencing of the human genome has, for me, demonstrated this in an extremely powerful way. It has also helped reinforce my sense of our basic kinship with animals, who share very large percentages of our genome. So it is conceivable if we humans utilize our newly found genetic knowledge skillfully, it could help foster a greater sense of affinity and unity not only with our fellow human beings but with life as a whole." (p. 195)

2) "My plea is that we bring our spirituality, the full richness and simple wholesomeness of our basic human values, to bear upon the course of science and the direction of technology in human society. In essence, science and spirituality, though differing in their approaches, share the same end, which is the betterment of humanity." (p. 208)

Bill says

This is the first book I've read by HHDL. I was most interested in his descriptions, conceptions, and usages of quantum mechanics and metaphysics. HHDL starts off with a strong discussion of the people in his life, many of them being prominent religious and scientific scholars, that introduced him to scientific fields and theories leading to important philosophical paradigm shifts.

His discussion of ramifications of these shifts was the most profound and thought-provoking aspect of the book. HHDL worked hard to present a balance between scientific pursuits, viewpoints, and ideologies and how these can be (and, as he argues, should be) interpreted within the context of Buddhist precepts.

The later stages of the book focused on his discussions on levels and definitions of consciousness, as well as on the ethical responsibilities of humanity and science. While these were of relevance, they were not of interest to the more philosophical and metaphysical discussions that I felt were at the heart of his work.

Mazola1 says

With this book, the Dalai Lama shows that he is at once the most spiritual of persons, and the most practical. In

The Universe In A Single Atom, he shows one possible method for people living in the modern age of nuclear power, quantum physics and genetic engineering to combine the knowledge of science with the wisdom of spirituality. Just as Einstein thought that religion without science is blind and science without religion is lame, the Dalai Lama believes that "spirituality and science are different but complementary investigative approaches with the same greater goal, of seeking the truth."

The Universe In A Single Atom briefly tells the story of the Dalai Lama's education, spiritual and scientific, and explains his thoughts on how we can use both science and religion to make the world a better place. In doing so, the Dalai Lama examines the strengths and limitations of both. For instance, although he believes that science cannot answer such questions as the meaning of life or good and evil, and that there is "more to human existence and reality than science can ever give use access to," he although feels that "spirituality must be tempered by the insights and discoveries of science," and that a mind-set that ignores these "can lead to fundamentalism."

This book is full of common sense and wisdom. It can help anyone who has wrestled with the hard questions of the meaning of life to learn to live with the compassion and peace that comes from spirituality and the practical knowledge and wonder that springs from scientific understanding.

Steven Stark says

This is a brilliant book. The Dalai Lama's theme is that science's emphasis on non-personal, "third-person" study and religion's emphasis on "first person" experience and awareness could be complementary.

If you have heard the Dalai Lama speak in his non-native tongue (English), he is a fantastic personality and he smiles a lot, but his communication is limited. It is a pleasure to read his ideas written first and then translated into English. This book reveals a mind that sparkles with wit, intelligence and an ability to pierce through to the heart of an issue.

He tells the story of his discovery and fascination with Western science. He writes of Buddhism's need to update some of its teaching methods and mythologies in the light of mankind's recent discoveries. He also writes of science's need to address issues of personal awareness and the need to be more open-minded concerning an attitude of total materialism. He also points out how akin Buddhism and science really are, as they have applied similar experimental methods to study awareness and the material world respectively.

Throughout, the Dalai Lama's logical process is a pleasure to read, and he comes across as always being open to new input, striving not to color it with preconceptions. This book is highly recommended to anyone interested in the relationship between science and religion.

Eduardo Santiago says

This guy really gets it! And: aaaaargh, no he doesn't. And: hmmm, maybe it's me who doesn't get it. Those were my reactions, often simultaneous, and I'm in awe of the Dalai Lama for his ability to think, reason, and express himself so clearly. Would that any other religious authority (or religious person, for that matter) be willing to put his beliefs under scrutiny. He does, sometimes despite discomfort, and that is what makes a scientist. This is an admirable man.

Unfortunately, there's a little too much "we Buddhists got this right": this or that holy book, or some scholar's revered interpretation thereof. Cherry-picking scripture and trying to get it to fit in with a scientific worldview. Alas, that's what he doesn't get: it just doesn't work that way. More importantly, it's just not even necessary. We don't look to Buddhist teachings for answers to cosmological questions—we seek to learn about ourselves. And there is where the two worldviews can coexist in harmony, and even support each other.

I dream of a world without religion. That is: a world without hatred, without intolerance, without child rape. I will not live to see such a world, but if we *have* to have religion, maybe we can work to make that be Buddhist or Buddhist-leaning. Self-reflective. Joyful. Curious. Seeking improvement... and not afraid to be questioned. This book is a start; a big step that way.

A note about the audio version: prepare for a love/hate. The reader is terrific, and (other than mispronouncing Feynman's name) does a great job of conveying difficult material at a suitable pace. But quite often the subject is too dense; you want to pause, think, reread, highlight, come back to. And with non-print, you can't. It's frustrating. But even with that, I think you can't really go wrong by listening to it instead of reading.

Sud666 says

This book might seem a strange reading choice since I am an atheist. During my years of life and travels around the world, I have found that of all the world's multitude of religious beliefs it is generally Buddhism that seems most comfortable with the concept of a coterminous relationship, if not a synergistic symbiosis, with science. This is not meant to imply that Buddhists make better scientists than say a Hindu or a Muslim, rather that the religion itself seems comfortable with the concepts of science. Other religions, primarily Christianity and Islam, have had a contentious and oft abhorrent relationship with science. Thus this book was an interesting insight into how a very religious man, the Dalai Lama, views science.

Tenzin Gyatso, the 14th Dalai Lama, has had a very interesting life. After having to leave Tibet due to the Communist Chinese invasion, the Dalai Lama had opportunities to meet and study with some eminent scientific minds. This book is his attempt to explain how a Buddhist monk entered into the world of modern science and concepts such as bubble chambers, particle accelerators and quantum physics.

It is not often, though there are some Jesuits I can think of, that I hear a religious leader express such comfort with the reality of science. He admits that this is not an attempt to unite the two spheres. They can not be united as one is the realm of myth and belief, while the other is an empirical discipline (or multi-disciplinary if you wish to look at all the various specialties of science) meant to explain how the world, I prefer the term reality, around us truly works. What I appreciate about the Dalai Lama's book was his very unassuming and simple take on many of the more esoteric concepts. He admits that his, knowledge of the mathematics underlying the science is poor. So when the scientists explained things to him they used general concepts which would be readily understood by a Tibetan monk and his translator. That's fine, this is not a technical

book at all. It attempts to juxtapose traditional Buddhist thought with rationalism. It's the Dalai Lama's disarming honesty, humility and respectful tone that truly drew me to this book.

Rare is it for a major religious figure to say the following:

"...scientific investigation proceeds by experiment, using instruments that analyze external phenomena.....if science shows something to exist or to be non-existent (which is not the same as not finding it), then we must acknowledge that as a fact. If a hypothesis is tested and found to be true, we must accept it. Likewise, Buddhism must accept the facts-whether found by science or found by contemplative insights. If, when we investigate something, we find there is reason and proof for it, we must acknowledge that as reality-even if it is in contradiction with a literal scriptural explanation that has held sway for many centuries or with a deeply held opinion or view."

That last line would be considered anathema, if not outright heresy, by many of the world's leading religious leaders. They fear science and thus have a confrontational view of it. I found no such undercurrent in this book. The Dalai lama makes clear that science is reality, though there are elements such as quantum physics that have some elements of spirituality about them. This book then shows how certain aspects of Buddhist thought, and the various schools of the philosophy underlying the lore, have been able to find some similarities in broad concepts, especially in the field of quantum physics.

In the end this book gets a 3 star rating because while it is an interesting story about how this Tibetan monk was introduced to the world of science and his attempts to balance the modalities of both types of thought. But, in the end I find the usefulness of trying to justify any particular religion and that religion's dogma/beliefs to actual science as about as useful as discussing how the Force from Star Wars "works" in or with science. Well it doesn't. At all.

Amy Drew says

very few people are able to give me hope about mankind and our future as a species. the dalai lama delivers that and so much more in all his books, but this one stands out to me because of my interest in science, and especially my fascination with (if complete misunderstanding of) the universe and quantum physics, etc. this book contains all those big universe questions that are usually way too scary to ask (where did time begin? how big is space? what existed before the big bang?) but presents them in conjunction with religion, and not in contrast to it, like pretty much everyone else likes to see those 2 institutions. this is the kind of book where I read 10 pages, then have to close the book and just think for about a half hour, then pick up and start reading again.

David Haller says

Well, the Buddhism and physics thing has been done to death; frankly, it's a little old-fashioned now. Fortunately, "Universe" doesn't dwell on this entirely, but it's a big theme. When it's there, the Dalai Lama sounds a bit like a smart, scientifically-inclined teenaged boy - I can certainly recognize much of his speculation.

The book is stronger in its exploration of the moral and ethical dimensions of science (predictably, the D.L. is staunchly *not* a scientific materialist), though it tends to come down (as one would expect) heavily on the "Buddhism" side. As a survey of aspects of Tibetan buddhism, the book become quite strong, strong enough to interest me in further readings on the subject.

The book is worth a look simply because of the author - it's interesting to see a major political and religious figure weigh in on issues of scientific epistemology (he's a fan of Popper), as well as the practical issues of ethics.

Vimal Thiagarajan says

A thought-provoking analysis and exposition on why the subjective, first person investigative methodology of spiritual tradition without its fundamentalist trappings and the objective third person investigative methodology of scientific tradition without its reductionist trappings are both indispensable and must go hand-in-hand if we are to fully comprehend reality and genuinely alleviate suffering. The ease and sharpness with which the Dalai Lama draws parallels and acute phenomenological similarities between modern scientific disciplines like cosmology, quantum Physics and neurobiology and the foundational tenets of the Buddhist spiritual tradition and the epistemological and ontological bricks and mortar of Buddhism that were put in place by Indian logicians like Nagarjuna, Asanga, Dharmakirti and Vasubandhu - was the most captivating part of the book for me.

That isn't to say the exposition was very lucid(atleast for me with no prior knowledge of Buddhist epistemology) - but with some application you could think them through and self-verify and assimilate. The book also has a lot of autobiographical snippets on the Dalai Lama's troubled political life, the daily rigors of his contemplative practice, and interesting details from his meetings with several other world leaders and scientists in Dharamsala and elsewhere.

Overall an immersive and appealing read, which has done enough to get me looking to read more of Dalai Lama XIV.

Mozzarella says

I've been a Hawking fan for years, but couldn't quite reconcile science with religion till I read this book. This was my introduction to the Dalai Lama, and I felt very comfortable first understanding his background and his curiosity, and, of course, his wisdom, as he explains, explores how empirical science and spirituality can coexist. In fact, one cannot exist without the other. I still have a lot of trouble with the Big Bang Theory, but am able to wrap my head around it a little better when you can add religion to the mix. Not mutually exclusive anymore. And I especially liked the Dalai Lama's humble way of presenting. The book felt friendly and not pedantic.

Mark says

For all my introspection and soul-searching on the subject of how to integrate Western science into my philosophical views of the world, I wish that I had read this book years ago – it would have saved me a lot of hard thinking on my own. Ouch. As it turns out, the Dalai Lama has been on a decades-long campaign to

import much of the Western science canon into the training of new Tibetan Buddhist monks. A large part of the book is spent discussing where science fails (reductionism/materialism) and how Buddhism can be used to bolster the scientific understanding of the natural world. The Dalai Lama's arguments for incorporating science into formal Buddhist training are two-fold: In his view, Buddhism is empirically based. If the mind is put through a certain set of exercises, certain results can be expected. This empiricism meshes well with the construct of Western science. As a result, if something can be empirically proven, then that finding trumps any historical religious teachings, dogmas, or texts.

The second reason is that the Dalai Lama has great hope in meshing the spirituality of Buddhism with science. In particular, he is interested in applying the powers of science to the study of consciousness. Whereas science has historically taken on the role of a third person observer, the D.L. would like to produce a science of the first person where consciousness can be pulled out into the open and more fully described and appreciated. Fascinating stuff.

Shira and Ari Evergreen says

I'm a humanistic skeptic and an anarchist, so I have an uneasy relationship with organized religion. And yet, many people who are dear to me care deeply about and believe in one religion or another, and I really dig certain aspects of many religions. So I try to keep an open mind. A Buddhist friend loaned this book to me and it was just what I needed. It made me love the Dalai Lama. He's a smart guy, a science lover, who's changing the way that Buddhism is taught (he hosts science and spirituality dialogues and has introduced science education into monk training!). He's a skeptic himself, very open-minded and thoughtful, critiquing Buddhism as well as science, and showing the many rich connections between the two. He concludes each chapter (they cover everything from quantum physics to GMO foods) with some compelling questions that need further exploration from both scientists, spiritual seekers, and those who participate in both belief systems. The book is a slim one, packed with interesting anecdotes and lots of opinion, couched in humility and compassion. It made me understand that Buddhism is a critical and still-evolving system of ethics, and that its findings have a lot to offer science.
