Richard Bernstein's story of his long journey through Asia is at once a memoir of adventurous travel and a record of cultural discovery and spiritual quest.

In the year 629, a greatly revered Chinese Buddhist monk, Hsuan Tsang, set out across Asia in search of the Buddhist Truth, to settle what he called the "perplexities of my mind." Nearly a millennium and a half later, Richard Bernstein retraces the monk's steps from the Tang dynasty capital at Xian through ancient Silk Road oases, over forbidding mountain passes to Tashkent, Samarkand, and the Amu-Darya River, across Pakistan to the holiest cities of India—and back.

Juxtaposing his experiences with those of Hsuan Tsang, Bernstein reconstructs the hazards and glories of this long and sinuous route, comparing present and past. The monk described what he saw and experienced—landscapes, customs, and, above all, people and the variety of religious beliefs held by those he met. So does our present-day author—taking us to Buddhist cave temples, to the holy places of the Buddha's own life, to the ruins of the Gandharan civilization in Pakistan, to the university in the Ganges Valley where Hsuan Tsang studied. He too encounters extraordinary figures—among them a German monk in Bodhgaya, a down-and-out maharaja, and a supposed reincarnation of Shiva.

And he follows the path of Hsuan Tsang not only in physical but in contemplative ways, reflecting on the mysteries and paradoxes of Buddhist philosophy and on the nature of the Ultimate Truth that was Hsuan Tsang's goal. The book is a vivid, profoundly felt account of two stirring adventures—one in the past and one in the present—in pursuit of illumination.