Cultivating Mental Balance: A Buddhist View

B. Alan Wallace, Ph.D.

Santa Barbara Institute for Consciousness Studies

(http://sbinstitute.com)
The Urgent Need to Re-envision the “Good Life”

• The Bulletin of Atomic Scientists announced today that the Doomsday clock—a metaphor to how close humanity is to destroying the planet—remains at 3 minutes to midnight.

• “When we call these dangers existential, that is exactly what we mean: They threaten the very existence of civilization and therefore should be the first order of business for leaders who care about their constituents and their countries.”

• The publication’s Sivan Kartha, a climate change expert, said, “Unless we change the way we think, humanity remains in serious danger.”
Two Types of Happiness

• Hedonic pleasure: the pleasure derived from pleasant stimuli and the avoidance of unpleasant stimuli ~ the hunter-gatherer approach

• Genuine well-being: the well-being derived from an ethical way of life, mental balance, and wisdom ~ the cultivator approach
Dimensions of Human Flourishing

• Ethics ~ social & environmental flourishing

• Mental Balance ~ psychological flourishing

• Wisdom ~ spiritual flourishing
Social & Environmental Flourishing

• Harmony within the family, communities, nations, and international relations

• Harmony with the ecosphere, maintaining a sustainable economy, without environmental degradation

• A harmonious balance of unity and diversity
Psychological Flourishing

- A sense of well-being that is not contingent on external or internal stimuli, and is qualified by serenity, joy, and contentment, rather than excitement and arousal

- Derives from conative, attentional, cognitive, and emotional balance
Conative Imbalances

• Conative deficit: apathetic loss of desire for happiness and its causes

• Conative hyperactivity: obsessive desire that obscures the reality of the present

• Conative dysfunction: desire for things not conducive to one’s own or others’ well-being, e.g., addiction
Fourfold Vision Quest

• What would make you truly happy?
• What would you love to receive from the world to help you find such well-being?
• How would you love to transform and mature inwardly in order to realize such well-being?
• In order to lead the most meaningful life possible, what would you love to offer to the world?
Attentional Imbalances

• Laxity (deficit): loss of clarity and vividness of attention

• Excitation (hyperactivity): involuntary agitation and distraction driven by compulsive desires

• Attentional dysfunction: attending in afflictive ways
Two Faculties for Refining Attention

• Mindfulness: the faculty of sustaining voluntary attention continuously upon a familiar object, without forgetfulness or distraction

• Introspection: the faculty of monitoring the mind, recognizing the occurrence of excitation and laxity

• Results: relaxation, stability, and vividness of attention
Cognitive Imbalances

• Cognitive deficit: failure to perceive what is present in the six fields of experience

• Cognitive hyperactivity: conflation of conceptual projections with perceptual experience

• Cognitive dysfunction: distorted perceptual or conceptual experience of reality
Neuropsychiatrist Eric R. Kandel (Nobel Laureate):

“The brain is a complex biological organ possessing immense computational capability: it constructs our sensory experience, regulates our thoughts and emotions, and controls our actions. It is responsible not only for relatively simple motor behaviors like running and eating, but also for complex acts that we consider quintessentially human, like thinking, speaking and creating works of art. Looked at from this perspective, our mind is a set of operations carried out by our brain. The same principle of unity applies to mental disorders.”
An Epidemic of Unhealthy Minds

DEPRESSION IS THE #1 CAUSE OF DISABILITY WORLDWIDE

RISK IS 32% HIGHER IN WEALTHY COUNTRIES

US GDP ($ TRILLION)

CHANGE IN WELL-BEING (SINCE 1950):

INCREASE IN DEPRESSION (SINCE 1950):

20% OF HIGH SCHOOL-AGED BOYS IN THE US HAVE BEEN DIAGNOSED WITH ADHD

30% OF ALL US VETERANS HAVE CONSIDERED SUICIDE

22 COMMIT IT EVERY DAY

Sources:
- ADHD data: http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/01/health/more-diagnoses-of-hyperactivity-causing-concern.html
- GDP data: www.bea.gov/national/xls/gdplev.xls
- Well-being data: [Scott to insert]
Scientific Empiricism to the Rescue

- The revolution in pharmacology has given doctors more drugs to use, allowing millions of people to reduce their symptoms. Yet the overall impact of this drug revolution on public health has been mixed, and decades of research on the drugs’ mechanism — on serotonin, for example, the target of antidepressant drugs like Prozac — has taught scientists nothing about the causes of mental illness.

- The benefits of antidepressants are now known to be “nonexistent to negligible” in patients with mild, moderate, and even severe depression, and high doses of antidepressants are hardly more effective than low ones. “Antidepressant Drug Effects and Depression Severity: A Patient-Level Meta-analysis” JAMA. 2010;303(1):47-53.
A Cognitive Deficit in the Mind Sciences

Alex Rosenberg, co-director of the Center for Social and Philosophical Implications of Neuroscience in the Duke Initiative for Science and Society:

• “We never have direct access to our thoughts.”
• “Self-consciousness has nothing else to work with but the same sensory data we use to figure out what other people are doing and are going to do.”
• “There is no first-person point of view...We have no privileged access to our own minds.”
Neuropsychiatrist David Galin:

Clinical psychologists have found evidence that the loss of self-monitoring is more damaging to the personality than the loss of a sensory faculty or motor functions. Specifically, self-monitoring is critical in acquiring and maintaining complex types of behavior and in adapting to changing conditions.

Challenges for Introspection

William James:

“Introspection is difficult and fallible; and ... the difficulty is simply that of all observation of whatever kind... The only safeguard is in the final consensus of our farther knowledge about the thing in question, later views correcting earlier ones, until at last the harmony of a consistent system is reached.”
Emotional Imbalances

- **Emotional deficit**
  - Affective deadness within
  - Cold indifference to people & events

- **Emotional hyperactivity**
  - Elation and depression
  - Hope and fear
  - Adulation and contempt
  - Attachment and anger

- **Emotional dysfunction**
  - Inappropriate responses to situations
Cultivating Emotional Balance

- Loving-kindness
- Compassion
- Empathetic joy
- Equanimity
Remedying Emotional Imbalances

• Remedy hedonism with loving-kindness

• Remedy aloof indifference with compassion

• Remedy depression with empathetic joy

• Remedy self-centered attachment and aversion with equanimity
## A Matrix of Mental Balance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mental Faculty</th>
<th>Spectrum</th>
<th>Causes</th>
<th>Meditations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conative</td>
<td>Optimal, Deficient, Hyperactive, Dysfunctional</td>
<td>Social/environmental, Physiological, Behavioral, Psychological</td>
<td>Fourfold vision of flourishing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attentional</td>
<td>Optimal, Deficient, Hyperactive, Dysfunctional</td>
<td>Social/environmental, Physiological, Behavioral, Psychological</td>
<td>Four modes of attentional training</td>
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<td>Four applications of mindfulness: (1) body, (2) feelings, (3) mind, (4) phenomena</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Spiritual Flourishing

• A quality of well-being that carries one through all the vicissitudes of life and death

• Derives from knowing ourselves and our relation to the universe ~ liberation through insight
Conclusions

• Genuine happiness is cultivated by way of ethics, mental balance, and wisdom.

• Mental health is cultivated by way of conative, attentional, cognitive, and affective balance.

• Exceptional mental balance is the basis for knowing reality as it is.