

# Cultivating Mental Balance: A Buddhist View

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# 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.”

# 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 affective 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

# Two Types of Happiness

- Hedonic pleasure: the pleasure derived from pleasant stimuli and the avoidance of unpleasant stimuli ~ the hunter-gatherer approach
- Genuine happiness: the well-being derived from an ethical way of life, mental balance, and wisdom ~ the cultivator approach

# 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

# Cognitive Imbalances in Mental Healthcare

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.”

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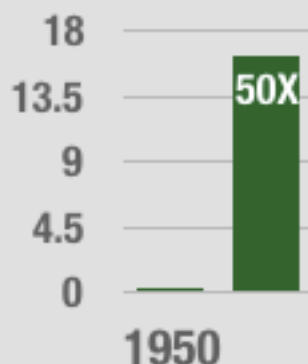
CAUSE

ABILITY  
DWIDE

RISK IS  
**32%**  
HIGHER IN  
WEALTHY  
COUNTRIES

US GDP

(\$ TRILLION)



CHANGE IN  
WELL-BEING  
(SINCE 1950):

0

**20%**

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

**ADHD**

**30%**

OF ALL US  
VETERANS  
HAVE  
CONSIDERED  
SUICIDE

**22**

COMMIT  
EVERY  
DAY

# 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.

# Contemplative Empiricism to the Rescue

- Buddha: “This is the direct path, monks, for the purification of beings, for the overcoming of sorrow and lamentation, for overcoming pain and grief, for reaching the authentic path, for the realization of *nirvana*—namely the four applications of mindfulness.”
- Mindfulness of the body, feelings, mind, and phenomena

# 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

Mental Faculty	Spectrum	Causes	Meditations
Conative	Optimal Deficient Hyperactive Dysfunctional	Social/environmental Physiological Behavioral Psychological	Fourfold vision of flourishing
Attentional	Optimal Deficient Hyperactive Dysfunctional	Social/environmental Physiological Behavioral Psychological	Four modes of attentional training
Cognitive	Optimal Deficient Hyperactive Dysfunctional	Social/environmental Physiological Behavioral Psychological	Four applications of mindfulness: (1) body, (2) feelings, (3) mind, (4) phenomena
Emotional	Optimal Deficient Hyperactive Dysfunctional	Social/environmental Physiological Behavioral Psychological	Four immeasurables

# 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.