

A Buddhist View of Optimal Mental Health

B. Alan Wallace
Santa Barbara Institute for Consciousness Studies
(<http://sbinstitute.com>)

Human Nature

- Essentially sinful, neurotic, and selfish?
- Essentially good, sane, and caring?
- Genetically programmed bio-robot?
- Spiritual being with ethical responsibility?

Eudaimonia

Aristotle:

Eudaimonia is equivalent to “the human good,” and it “comes to be disclosed as a being-at-work of the soul in accordance with virtue, and if the virtues are more than one, in accordance with the best and most complete virtue.”

Hedonic & Eudaimonic Well-being

- The hedonic approach: the pursuit of mental and physical pleasure and the avoidance of pain
- The eudaimonic approach: the integrated pursuit of happiness, truth, and virtue

The Meaning of Life

H. H. Dalai Lama:

“I believe that the very purpose of our life is to seek happiness. Whether one believes in religion or not, whether one believes in this religion or that religion, we all are seeking something better in life. So, I think, the very motion of our life is towards happiness.”

The Framework of Buddhist Practice

- Ethics ~ social flourishing
- Mental Balance ~
psychological flourishing
- Contemplative Insight ~ spiritual
flourishing

Central Elements of Mental Health

- Conative balance
- Attentional balance
- Cognitive balance
- Affective balance

Conative Imbalances

- Conative deficit: apathetic loss of desire for happiness and its causes, e.g. *acedia*
- 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

Cultivation of Conative Balance

- Remedy apathy with recognition of the possibility of genuine happiness
- Remedy obsessive desire with the cultivation of contentment
- Remedy mistaken desires with recognition of the true causes of genuine happiness and of vulnerability to suffering

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 to Balance Attention

- Mindfulness: the ability to sustain voluntary attention continuously upon a familiar object, without forgetfulness or distraction
- Introspection: the ability to monitor mental processes, such as the quality of the attention, swiftly recognizing whether it has succumbed to either excitation or laxity

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

Cultivation of Cognitive Balance

Four Applications of Mindfulness to:

- Body and the Physical World
- Feelings
- Mental States & Processes
- Phenomena at large

Affective Imbalances

- Affective deficit
 - Affective deadness within
 - Cold indifference to people & events
- Affective hyperactivity
 - Elation and depression
 - Hope and fear
 - Adulation and contempt
 - Attachment and anger
- Affective dysfunction
 - Inappropriate responses to situations

Cultivating the Heart

- 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 with equanimity

Human Nature, Revisited

- The habitual state of an imbalanced mind is one of dissatisfaction and unease.
- The ground state of awareness is innate bliss, luminosity, and serenity—a wellspring of wisdom, compassion, and creativity.

Conclusion

- A meaningful life consists of the integrated pursuit of genuine happiness, truth, and virtue.
- Genuine happiness is cultivated by way of ethics, mental health, and insight.
- Mental health is cultivated by way of conative, attentional, cognitive, and affective balance.