

Accentuating the Positive

In a new book, B. Alan Wallace and Brian Hodel tackle the ancient question – what is the mind? From the moving narrative of Alan’s own life through the fallacies of scientific materialism, the authors take us to the heart of the Buddhist science of consciousness. Here is an excerpt:

Historically in the West, the existence of negative emotions has been taken for granted.

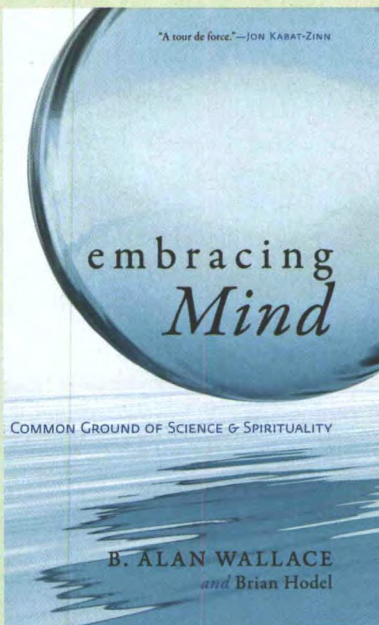
In Darwin’s view, aggression served the survival of the species. Freud believed that psychotherapy could do no more than make the mentally disturbed patient ordinarily happy – that is, subject to the normal flux of negative and positive emotions. Western philosophers have viewed aggression and hostility among humans as natural and permanent. And although we are often encouraged to “think positive,” we view those with a permanent positive attitude toward life – “optimists” – as a rare breed. Such exceptional people are frequently highlighted by the media in “human interest” stories. What makes them interesting is that they are so unusual, at least in Western culture.

Yet evolutionary theory has never satisfactorily explained the origin of such highly valued positive emotions as empathy and compassion. According to Buddhism, our fundamental motivation in life is the quest for happiness. Love (the wish that others have happiness and its causes) and compassion (the wish that others be spared suffering and its causes) are also considered basic to human nature. Thus, from this point of view we are essentially altruistic, contradicting the generally accepted Western view that negativity is the norm. On the contrary, according to Buddhism, negativity derives from a misunderstanding of the mind and the universe we inhabit. For Buddhism the unenlightened mind is dysfunctional. According to this view, one of the greatest errors in thinking is the belief that happiness derives essentially from one’s outer circumstances.

WHY SO HAPPY?

Alan remembers from his experience of living for years in Asia that the most positive, optimistic people of his acquaintance have come from a group we would normally expect to be heavily burdened by sorrow and negativity, Tibetan refugees. The Tibetans he met in his youth in northern India and elsewhere had recently escaped from their homeland, which was overrun by the Communist Chinese army. They had left behind nearly all of their possessions, family, friends, and teachers, some of whom had been murdered or died on the treacherous journey to freedom. Many of these refugees, unaccustomed to the climate of low-lying India, perished from diseases ranging from dysentery to tuberculosis. The refugee camps were crowded and dirty. Food was often scarce. Many Tibetans survived by taking difficult jobs few Indians would accept, such as road building in higher elevations, work only accomplished by pick and shovel. Their outer conditions were extremely difficult, yet the inner attitude of the overwhelming majority was positive.

Back then one often encountered cases or heard stories of monks who had been imprisoned and tortured by the Chinese for decades. Yet some of these monks claimed that the experience had strengthened their spiritual practice, providing them with a situation where they could test and improve the depth and sincerity of their compassion by maintaining an attitude of loving-kindness toward their tormentors. Some even characterized their tenure in prison as a kind of spiritual retreat. The happiness of these refugees, so deprived in terms of their material situation, was based



on inner, psychological attitudes and mental balance. Something inherent in their cultural background gave them a buoyancy that lifted them above the negativity of their desperate circumstances.

Although this kind of response to extreme adversity by Tibetans (a mostly Buddhist population) seems to contradict common sense, in fact it conforms to modern research into how our attitudes are related to inner and outer circumstances. Positive feelings based on material well-being, for instance, are fleeting. Studies have shown that lottery winners, who usually experience a flood of positive emotions in the initial period after receiving their windfall, soon revert to more or less the same pattern of emotional ups and downs they had experienced previously. Psychologist Tim Kasser, in his book *The High Price of Materialism*, concludes, "Existing scientific research on the value of materialism yields clear and consistent findings. People who are highly focused on materialistic values have lower personal well-being and psychological health than those who believe that materialistic pursuits are relatively unimportant."¹

TREATING SYMPTOMS OR CAUSES?

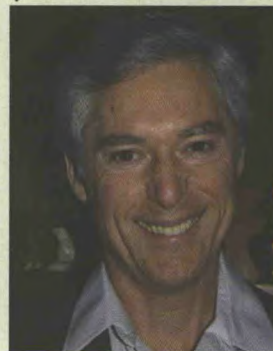
Neuroscience has become increasingly able to home in on the physical mechanisms associated with negative and positive emotions, identifying, for example, a correspondence between an overactive amygdala and right frontal lobe with the negative emotions and an active left frontal lobe with the positive ones. Given this knowledge, how should we proceed in our quest to make life more meaningful and enjoyable? Drugs such as antidepressants are common and have shown positive results (along with some disturbing side effects). Yet by focusing on the physical symptoms of mental illness are we treating the real causes? What is the most effective way to deal with these problems? If an overactive amygdala or the dysfunction of some neurotransmitter has been caused by a life experience such as a childhood trauma or a dysfunctional marriage, doesn't it make more sense to untangle the resulting negative mental and emotional patterns and replace them with more wholesome attitudes?

Buddhist psychology approaches these causes through systematic cognitive intervention. One familiarizes oneself with wholesome attitudes while developing the attentional skills needed to recognize one's afflictive thoughts and emotions in the light of a deeper understanding of the

psyche from which they emanate. This can have a dramatic effect on how one reacts to stimuli. For example, when negativity arises, one catches it before the spark becomes a wildfire. It is then possible to analyze the thought or emotion, looking into its origin, appropriateness, and whether it is constructive or destructive. One can also begin to counteract these flare-ups with wholesome qualities such as patience, love, and compassion. All of this leads to developing a stable psychological basis for a healthy, happy, and positive inner life. The connection with ethics and an increased understanding of the nature of the mind make this training a far deeper and more effective approach than merely encouraging oneself with slogans to be positive.

The positive psychology of Buddhism, derived from its subtle and extensive understanding of the mind, is poised to provide a major contribution to the improvement of our mental health. Furthermore, the kind of detailed, accurate, objective feedback that can be supplied by subjects skilled in meditation is the missing link needed to complement neuroscientific research on the brain and to enrich and clarify concepts and procedures originating in Western psychology. Such collaboration would fulfill the criteria proposed by William James, which we looked at in part 1.² James envisioned a science of mind incorporating both the inner subjective experience of the mind and its outer physical correlates and expressions.

Such research would proceed by coordinating three perspectives: (1) the observations of the highly trained subject (the first-person point of view – that is, the one who is having the experience) with (2) data gleaned in cooperation by skilled interviewers (the second-person view-point) and (3) objective physical measurements of the activity of the brain and that of other physical systems (the third-person perspective). Ideally, such an approach would yield a complete, holistic picture of what the mind is and how it functions. As the many Westerners who have flocked to meditation know, these new technologies from the East are a breath of fresh air for a troubled modern world. ●



B. Alan Wallace

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¹ Tim Kasser, *The High Price of Materialism* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2002), 22.

² William James, *Principles of Psychology* (New York:Dover, 1890), 322.