

B. Alan Wallace

A New Paradigm for Science and Religion

Week Three: "Intersubjectively Validated Empirical Discoveries by Buddhist Contemplatives"

September 18, 2021



The title of this third talk is "Intersubjectively Validated Empirical Discoveries by Buddhist Contemplatives." Over the last 40 years or so, there have been dozens and dozens, maybe hundreds, of scientific studies of meditation. I've been involved in such studies since 1992 with a brilliant team of neuroscientists including Richard Davidson and Francisco Varela. Virtually all of these scientific studies have been looking at meditation from the outside, studying the brain and behavior and receiving reports from meditators. But I don't know of a single one that has acknowledged that meditators themselves may be making their own discoveries, especially professionally trained ones who will spend years or decades in solitary meditative practice, developing exceptional attention, skills, concentration, and introspection and making extraordinary discoveries that you may never make by studying the brains and behavior of others or giving questionnaires to ordinary people off the street.

This is more than 2,500 years of Buddhist inquiry rooted in centuries of the development and refinement of samadhi, highly focused, high-frequency, high-resolution concentration that above all is used to explore the very nature of the mind. This is the telescope for the mind. As the telescope was the first major piece of technology used to explore the heavens, celestial bodies, planets, and stars, samadhi is the telescope for probing into the depths of the mind. And we haven't even begun this process in modern psychology, largely because it's following the drummer of materialism.

The ideological and methodological constraints of materialism is that it always looks outward. But that's a problem when the mind isn't outward. The mind is inward. It is not objective, physical, or quantitative. So live with it. We can either allow modern science to still be handcuffed by the constraints of materialism, or we can throw off the handcuffs and complement objective science with subjective science, physical science with contemplative science. Let's be open to the discoveries Buddhists, Hindus, and other Asian contemplatives have made that we

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have not that might actually challenge or even undermine some of our most cherished beliefs, which are basically unquestioned beliefs conflated with scientific knowledge.

This is the biggest scam, frankly: to present that which is merely a metaphysical belief in materialism as a scientific fact. This is fake news at its worst. While the strength of Eurocentric science is studying and making extraordinary discoveries in terms of the objective, physical, and quantitative world, when it comes to the mind, we've been left largely in the dark about all the fundamental issues: the nature of mind, the origins of mind, the interactions of mind and body, the potentials of mind, and what happens at death. All we have from the scientific community is a whole bunch of beliefs, and they're all materialistic beliefs, not a single one of which has actually been validated by scientific research.

One of the great superstitions and myths of the modern world still being promoted by the neuroscientific community is that the mind is what the brain does. The mind is nothing more than a function of the brain. That's never been proved. That's just a belief. It's a metaphysical belief rooted in the dogma of materialism. The notion that the brain itself is solely responsible for generating all mental states in consciousness is a blind belief unsupported by empirical evidence. The notion that death means annihilation of individual consciousness is a belief. Scientists don't know the origins of consciousness. They don't have a clue. They can't measure it. They can't define it. They don't know what it is. Therefore, they don't have a clue what happens to consciousness at death—just beliefs. It's materialism, which is a kind of fundamentalism posing as science. This has been absolutely devastating to the mind sciences for the last 100 years.

But where Western science is weak, it's exactly there that Buddhism is strong. Buddhism doesn't have sophisticated mathematics. It doesn't have technology. It hasn't made many of the

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discoveries made by modern science. We don't need to elaborate on that. But where Buddhism is strong is that the Buddha himself, shortly after he left his home, learned the technology of the development of samadhi [concentration] from two teachers. He didn't take samadhi as an end in itself but rather used this finely honed, highly focused concentration to penetrate the very nature of the mind and come up with genuine discoveries that have been intersubjectively replicated by generations of yogis for 2,500 years.

This is way beyond folk psychology. Folk astronomy is stargazing. You look with the naked eye. Real astronomy began with the telescope. Real science of mind should begin by developing the contemplative technology of highly refined attention, mindfulness, introspection, and concentration, and that's what Buddhism has been doing for 2,500 years and modern science hasn't even yet begun.

Ethics, fundamentally, is nonviolence and benevolence. Everything else is derivative in the Buddhist understanding of ethics, but that's core. On that basis, the second training, the higher training in Buddhism, is the cultivation of samadhi, which is cultivating not just single-pointed concentration but exceptional levels of mental health and balance. There are many methods for developing samadhi, and these methods are often called shamatha, which literally means simply quiescence, a calming of the mind, of its tendencies for ADHD, frankly—attention deficit, where the mind becomes dull and lax, or attention hyperactivity, where the mind becomes agitated and turbulent or falls into rumination. Such a mind that hasn't been trained in terms of attention skills is useless for investigating itself because you can't see through the fog of all these involuntary thoughts and rumination—the mind out of control. It's like trying to gaze into a pool of water that's muddy, whipped by the wind, colored with dye, and so forth.

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To look into the depths of the mind, you need to still the mind. For one method for this, I cite one of my own teachers, the late Yangthang Rinpoche, a formidable Dzogchen practitioner of the Dzogchen school of Tibetan Buddhism. He said, "By looking inward, you observe your own mind. Do not follow after past thoughts or anticipate thoughts to come. As for the wild agitation of the thoughts of the present moment, as soon as you direct your mind inward upon itself, loosely rest right there without fixing or modifying anything in the slightest." This is a classic method of shamatha, especially practiced in the Mahamudra and Dzogchen traditions of Indo-Tibetan Buddhism.

Many of us have done this for 15–30 minutes a day, practicing mindfulness or observing our mind. But what about those people over centuries through the modern era who have taken this as a professional discipline, like getting a PhD in neuroscience or astronomy? People will go off into solitary retreat under wise counsel of an experienced teacher. They go into the contemplative laboratories called a meditation hut or meditation cave in Tibet, and they practice 12–16 hours a day, receiving professional training and becoming professionally trained contemplatives. This has been going on for centuries in India, Southeast Asia, East Asia, and Tibet, the tradition I know best. What discoveries have been made by people who develop this kind of contemplative technology and look right into the very nature of mind, its origins, its potentials, and the very nature of consciousness itself?

So many points about the nature of consciousness being a mystery in modern science are not mysteries at all in Buddhism because we have the right technology. Without a telescope, how would you know whether the sun is further away from the earth than the moon? How would you know that Jupiter has moons? The answer is you wouldn't. When you develop and achieve shamatha in which your human mind, your psyche, dissolves back into a relative ground, what's

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that like? What's it like when your mind becomes still and descends right into its very ground of becoming?

The great 19th-century Dzogchen master Ddūjom Lingpa writes, "By applying yourself to this practice [of turning inward, resting your awareness, and observing the movements of the mind without identifying with them] continuously at all times, both during and between meditation sessions, eventually, all coarse and subtle thoughts will be calmed in the empty expanse of the essential nature of your mind. You will become still in an unfluctuating state and stable. In this, you will experience bliss like the warmth of a fire, luminosity like the dawn, and nonconceptuality like an ocean unmoved by waves."

You slip into an underlying subtle continuum of mental consciousness. This discovery has been replicated thousands of times over hundreds of years not only in Buddhism but in other traditions as well. In the Theravada tradition, this continuum is called the bhavanga; in the Indo-Tibetan tradition it is called the alaya-vijnana, or substrate consciousness. It's a subtle continuum of mental consciousness that is not human. It is not configured by the brain or contingent upon brain activity. The notion that all states of consciousness are generated by the brain is accepted unquestionably but utterly refuted by professionals who actually know how to explore the nature of consciousness.

You slip into a state where your own awareness is luminous, bright, and clear, and what you're aware of is a sheer vacuity that's called the substrate or the alaya, and all that remains is your consciousness just resting in this relative ground state. The Buddhist understanding of this is a dimension of consciousness utterly unknown to modern science. This has been accessed and explored repeatedly and extensively in the Buddhist and other traditions.

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The notion that all memories are encoded in the brain is just one more unquestioned belief of materialism. It doesn't actually mean anything. Our brain correlates to memories, of course, but the notion that your memories of your mother, your child, and so forth, are somehow encoded in chemicals is a nutty idea. All scientists know is that subjective experiences are correlated with brain activity, but they don't have a clue and they are learning nothing about the actual nature of these correlations. The notion that the brain is the hard drive and memories and all subjective experience are the software of the mind is one more unquestioned superstition that's being falsely paraded as scientific knowledge.

The whole notion of continuity of consciousness from lifetime to lifetime, or conservation of consciousness, is something that we can trace in Western philosophy back to Pythagoras on through Socrates, Plato, and Plotinus. This discovery that there is a subtle dimension of consciousness that carries on from lifetime to lifetime we find among contemplatives in Hindu, Taoist, Jewish, Christian, and Muslim traditions. There's also strong scientific evidence over the last 50 years, especially from the Division of Perceptual Studies at the University of Virginia, of children accurately recalling past-life experiences. This has been tested scientifically and rigorously.

Carl Sagan, the well-known astronomer, says, "One claim that deserves serious study is that young children sometimes report the details of a previous life, which upon checking turned out to be accurate and which they could not have known about in any other way than reincarnation." If the hypothesis of continuity of consciousness from lifetime to lifetime were incompatible with science, Carl Sagan would have known about it. There's nothing incompatible with science, but the notion of continuity of consciousness from lifetime to lifetime, re-embodied time again, is incompatible with the blind dogma of materialism.

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It's time to throw off these handcuffs and look with fresh vision and open mind and explore the nature of the mind from inside. What I'm suggesting here is that the nature of the mind, its potentials, and the very nature of consciousness don't need to remain a mystery if we use the time-tested technology of Buddhism and other contemplative traditions to explore: What is the nature of mind? What is the deepest ground of the mind? What are the multiple dimensions of mind? It is to this that we turn in our next lecture: the nature of the mind and its role in reality as a whole, right down to the very ground of being. Stay tuned.