Neuropsychology meets Dzogchen: A review of the current science of meditation from a Buddhist perspective

A Review of

Mind, Brain and the Path to Happiness: A Guide to Buddhist Mind Training and the Neuroscience of Meditation

by Dusana Dorjee


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Citation:

Recent years have seen an explosion of interest in meditation. Meditation-based forms of therapy are making their way into clinical and private practices, with documented benefits (Keng, Smoski, & Robins, 2011). Reflecting this growing interest, new books abound on different types of meditation practices and their potential benefits for various kinds of ailments, such as physical pain, addictions, or relationship difficulties. Many of these popular books include a neuroscientific spin, for good measure, but few display rigorous presentations of the scientific data—or of the meditation practices themselves.

Dusana Dorjee’s book *Mind, Brain and the Path to Happiness* has much more to offer. This ambitious book is, in its own words, “a contemporary account of traditional Buddhist mind training and the pursuit of well-being and happiness in the context of the latest research in psychology and the neuroscience of meditation” (book jacket). Targeted at health professionals, educators, and researchers, this book expertly guides the reader through these two distinct spheres of knowledge, namely modern scientific research on meditation (but also, more generally, research on happiness, attention, emotions, and consciousness) and Buddhist theory and practice.

Dorjee proposes to look "beyond the current secular applications of meditation-based practices where they mostly serve as ways to reduce stress and to cope with or prevent illness," arguing that the Buddhist practices from which these secular applications were inspired have much broader potential “for unlocking our ability to cultivate sustainable happiness, for our personal growth, and [for our] development across the life span” (p. ix). In recent years, others have also proposed that deeper exchanges between Buddhism and modern psychology could enhance psychologists’ use of meditation for therapeutic purposes (e.g., Dale Miller, 2014; Kang & Whittingham, 2010).
Dorjee is certainly well suited for her task. She is a trained clinical psychologist and cognitive neuroscientist currently conducting research on meditation. She is also a long-term practitioner and teacher of Dzogchen, a form of Buddhism traditionally practiced in Tibet and other Himalayan areas—and increasingly in the Western world as well.

The book is articulated around the proposal of a “pyramid of mind training” toward happiness and well-being. This pyramid comprises four levels: intention, attention, emotional balance, and exploration of deeper levels of consciousness. Each level is devoted its own chapter in which relevant findings from neuroscience and psychology are introduced, followed by some Buddhist perspectives.

Dorjee is evidently at ease with the material from both modern psychology and Buddhist psychology and invites the reader into her dual worldview, offering many wonderfully insightful reflections. For example, she highlights the connection between refined levels of attention and increased well-being, a connection “largely unknown to Western psychology and neuroscience” (p. 50). She also emphasizes an important point for Western practitioners, “that the goal-oriented approach based on sheer discipline does not work for meditation training, including training in attention, and we need to start with relaxation” (p. 57). When discussing the meditative cultivation of compassion—a type of practice that some fear may worsen one’s own suffering and lead to compassion burnout—she explains that, “somewhat paradoxically, the willingness to connect with suffering and see its causes with clarity leads to a deeper experience of well-being and happiness” (p. 87), as recognized in the recent psychological literature on compassion (Gilbert, 2009).

However, one major caveat with this book lies in its strong bias toward one particular branch of Buddhism, namely the Dzogchen tradition. Indeed, in Dorjee’s own words, this book “aims to
provide from a practitioner’s perspective an outline of the whole path of the mind’s development through the Buddhist mind training in Dzogchen” (p. 3). To support this bias, Dorjee argues that "the focus on a particular school of Buddhism . . . allows for more substantial discussions about the progression of mind training and gradual changes in the mind and brain” (p. 3). Perhaps so, and Dorjee’s outline of progression, borrowed from authentic Dzogchen sources, may speak to Dzogchen practitioners. However, it may not be directly applicable to other meditation practitioners.

Indeed, Buddhist scholars have argued that meditative models—such as stages of meditation training—and even meditative experiences themselves are culturally mediated (Gyatso, 1999). These models were developed through centuries of meditative practice—but they also reflect centuries of sectarian competition, inter-textual communications, hermeneutical conversations, and other factors. In short, any particular meditative model does not necessarily reflect a stand-alone experiential window into the mind, divorced from its roots of formation in a particular time and place. Dorjee does not address the sociohistorical roots of the Dzogchen tradition. She seems to take for granted that the Dzogchen theoretical framework is universally applicable. For instance, in the chapter on consciousness, the reader is introduced to the Dzogchen distinction of three layers of consciousness further subdivided into eight types (pp. 94-100). Although some of these types of consciousness are also recognized by other schools, others are controversial even within the Buddhist tradition. Yet Dorjee presents this framework as an incontrovertible discovery made by previous meditation masters, “based on the investigation of the mind using introspection grounded in enhanced skills of mindfulness and metacognition” (p. 94)—giving it a flair of objectivity that perhaps deserves deeper examination.

To be fair, not all sections of the book are tainted by this Dzogchen bias. The two central levels of
Dorjee’s pyramid of mind-training, “attention” and “emotional balance,” are relevant to meditation practices in general. The two corresponding chapters provide a broad, sophisticated exposition of the scientific and Buddhist (not just Dzogchen) perspectives. Dorjee expertly tours the reader through a brief history of modern psychology, from Maslow, Frankl, and Scherer to the latest research on meditation and its relationship to attention and emotions. These two chapters alone make this book well worth the time and effort to read it.

However, the pyramid’s first and last levels, namely “intention” and “deeper levels of consciousness,” are more problematic. It is no coincidence that these aspects of Buddhist practice have been left aside in secular meditation programs given how controversial they are, even across different branches of Buddhism—as Dorjee duly notes. Yet, for all her well-articulated calls for a better contextualization of meditation practices in the scientific research on meditation, Dorjee’s own conceptualization of Dzogchen often slips. For instance, Dorjee argues that “Dzogchen is particularly amenable to bridging Buddhist teachings with Western psychology, cognitive science and neuroscience . . . because of its explicit focus on mind training and exploration of the mind” (p. 30)—implying that this focus is somewhat specific or unique to Dzogchen (as opposed to other Buddhist schools), which is not necessarily the case. Dorjee also writes that “within the system of Tibetan Buddhism, Dzogchen is classified as the highest of the teachings” (pp. 29–30). What she fails to mention is that Dzogchen is also traditionally described as the least accessible of the teachings, applicable to only a small subset of aspiring practitioners. In any case, both claims (that Dzogchen is the “highest” and “least accessible”) have existed for various sociocultural reasons beyond the scope of this review and perhaps should not be taken at face value—especially since different Buddhist schools (such as Madhyamaka-Prasangika and Mahamudra) have made similar claims.
These contextualization issues are not mere scholastic disputes. Proper contextualization is essential for the successful implementation of meditation training in clinical and educational settings—a purported goal of this book. In these settings, meditation practices need to be recontextualized, and largely secularized, to be made accessible to the general public, which holds a variety of religious and philosophical views. When Dorjee asserts that “the Dzogchen tradition is particularly well positioned for…placing secular mindfulness-based practices on the continuum of traditional approaches to meditation” (p. 121), we find her arguments unconvincing. It is not that the lack of universal applicability of the Dzogchen map of progression somehow indicates a weakness of this particular framework compared to others. Rather, the problem stems from a confusion (inherent to the traditional Buddhist sources) between “descriptive” and “prescriptive” maps of mental states.

In other words, traditional accounts of the different stages on the path are meant as a prescriptive roadmap for the practitioner following a particular school, but not necessarily as a universal description of the “path to happiness” (or to enlightenment) that would apply for practitioners outside this school. Tellingly, the present Dalai Lama has urged for the delineation of different aspects of Buddhism—scientific, philosophical, and religious or spiritual—arguing that only its scientific, and perhaps philosophical, aspects should be considered universal, whereas the religious and spiritual aspects should be only for Buddhists (Dalai Lama, 2010). The difficulty, of course, lies in disentangling these different aspects, as they have been traditionally intertwined.

Despite her intention to bring the Dzogchen perspective into conversation with neuroscience, Dorjee seems ambivalent about the merit of secularizing its meditation practices. She laments the fact that “secular approaches to mindfulness, as useful as they are in bringing the benefits of certain meditation practices to broad audiences, do not contain teachings and practices covering
the whole Buddhist path to liberation” (p. 39). But this omission may have more advantages than hindrances. After all, secular meditation practices have been shown to benefit non-Buddhist participants who are willing to learn how to meditate but perhaps not to become Buddhists. Dorjee seems to imply that the inclusion of a context of “the Buddhist path of liberation” will necessarily bring participants into a deeper place of benefit and fulfillment. We are not convinced that this is true for everyone, given that the Buddhist path requires accepting certain models of mind and transcendence that may challenge the beliefs of religious or agnostic others.

This book even boldly discusses a concept purposefully left aside in secular applications of meditation: that of the ultimate goal of Buddhist practices, namely enlightenment. Dorjee proposes to think of enlightenment as “an exceptional state of well-being arising from a complete balance of virtuous motivation, attention, wholesome emotions and experiential understanding of the nature of mind” (p. 106). This definition is unfortunately too vague to be useful to scientists and clinicians: What does it mean to “balance” these four factors? Dorjee then briefly summarizes the traditional presentation of enlightenment according to Dzogchen—again, without contextualizing it with respect to other Buddhist schools or even relating it to her proposed four “balanced” factors of enlightenment.

Dorjee’s eagerness to bring “intention” and “deeper levels of consciousness” into the mainstream applications of meditation openly departs from previous exchanges between Buddhism and modern neuropsychological science, which have tended to focus on less controversial topics (Jinpa, 2010). In our view, Dorjee’s call for broadening and deepening these exchanges is, by itself, laudable—even though we take issue with her Dzogchen-centric proposal. Other authors have shown a more balanced approach (e.g., Dale Miller, 2014; Kang & Whittingham, 2010).
In conclusion, *Mind, Brain and the Path to Happiness* exemplifies the current tension between secularization and tradition when Buddhist-inspired meditation practices are imported into modern societies. Although the secularization movement has perhaps been overly careful in staying away from Buddhist concepts, in our opinion this book swings the pendulum too far in the other direction. The willingness to bring a specific meditative perspective into conversation with neuroscience is fascinating and broaches a model for future studies, but to stray from statements of contextualization makes Dorjee’s points less convincing.

However, in spite of this shortcoming, we applaud Dorjee for a well-articulated and courageous contribution. As the field of meditation research continues to mature and grow, books like this one are important stepping stones. They also highlight the importance for scientists in this field to educate themselves in the contemplative traditions underlying the practices that they seek to investigate, and for expert meditators and contemplative scholars to acquire solid training in the scientific approach in order to provide meaningful contributions to this endeavor (Desbordes & Negi, 2013). Dorjee sets an inspiring example. We hope that this new generation of scientific and contemplative investigators will work together toward future collaborative scientific studies of the mind.

**References**

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