

# Healing and Cultivating the Mind – Discovering Meditation

An interview with B. Alan Wallace by Valeria Camia

Our world is now facing unprecedented challenges. Healing and cultivating the mind, increasing the awareness of our emotional states to augment our capacity to regulate them and finding balance – these issues seem more urgent than ever. But how and where to begin? We have discussed this with Alan Wallace, from a degree in Physics to a Buddhist monastery, now he's about to open in Italy the first Centre for Contemplative Research.

**Carl Gustav Jung, in his preface to *The Psychology of the Unconscious*, wrote that “The great changes in humanity were never achieved with great laws, but by changing the mentality of the individual”.** He continued that introspection is the only right and necessary attitude to respond to our catastrophic times. It was 1916. More than hundred years later, our world is a burning house, a place where only careerism, success, our external appearance, money and the present only count, because there is no certainty in the future and the past doesn't belong to us.

**The western individual in this world – if he or she does not “appear” – then chooses to disappear. It's the numbers telling us that, the numbers of depression, of mental illnesses in general, of suicides. They are increasing.** We literally *lose our mind* – we lose ourselves. Healing and cultivating the mind, then, seems to be more urgent than ever. But where do we begin? And, most importantly, is it possible?

Alan Wallace, one of the most active voices in research projects connected with Buddhist meditation, does not have any doubts. It is about starting a true revolution in the Mind Sciences. An academic and practitioner of Buddhism since the 1970s, after spending 14 years as a Tibetan Buddhist monk and having received ordination from the Dalai Lama, Alan Wallace received a degree in Physics and Philosophy of Science and then he successfully completed a PhD in Religious Studies.

**In Tuscany, Alan Wallace has recently acquired a piece of land near Castellina Marittima in order to begin his revolutionary project.** Maybe the most revolutionary of projects: to integrate the spiritual insights of the western and eastern world with the more recent tradition of scientific research, in order to realize a more far-sighted worldview, today.

**“Since beginningless time, all religions invite us to look within ourselves, to be introspective.** However nowadays in the secularised society in which we live, religious belief is losing ground in favour of materialistic pragmatism, which tells people to abandon themselves to matter, *here and now*. We are living in the world, phenomenologically speaking.

The problem is that of the relationship between body and mind. The cartesian dualism!” If in the philosophy of Aristotle, the soul – which included the mind – was the real essence of man, conceived as a psychophysical oneness, in the 17<sup>th</sup> century Descartes twisted the identity paradigm by proposing the dualism of substances: from one side we have the *res extensa* (matter), and from the other we have the *res cogitans* (mind). Then the empiricists came along, with their critique of Aristotle and Descartes – since they believed they could extend our reason beyond the corporeal and perceived phenomena (i.e. observable phenomena) – the two philosophers were actually relying on deductive reasoning, promoting thus an insubstantial, empty, knowledge.

**“The last four centuries have brought about an explosion of scientific knowledge and technological know-how.** Starting from Galileo, down to Isaac Newton, to biology and neuroscience, just to quote a few fields of research: the modern scientific knowledge, methodologically rigorous, replicable, objective, falsifiable, has been directed “out there” towards observable phenomena, dismissing the essential substance which would be behind it. Very little is known about the mind-body relation and what is consciousness, what are the fundamental causes of happiness and suffering.”

But there’s more. “During the last forty years, while human knowledge of the physical world, of biology, sociology and economics has been increasing at an unprecedented pace, our modern civilization seems bent on destroying itself.” Human population has doubled; poverty and social inequality keep increasing; the intense exploitation of the natural environment is close to reaching the point of non-return, global warming is jeopardizing the ecosphere and our human civilization in general.

**Greed, stress, hostility between people,** mental sufferings are the evils of our century but, Alan Wallace emphasizes, “We didn’t make any progress in the knowledge of the human mind and its vices, the inner causes of suffering, let alone in the exploration of the resources of the human spirit – compassion, wisdom, generosity, patience, and internal contentment.” Technological progress – which has greatly contributed to our hedonic happiness – does not counterbalance the knowledge we possess about our environment’s external physical resources with knowledge about our inner resources, the psychological and spiritual resources of the human mind. We are not focusing on genuine happiness that emerges from ethics, mental balance, and wisdom.

In the land of Leonardo da Vinci and Galileo, the Center for Contemplative Research wished by Wallace will be the first institute in the world dedicated to scientific and contemplative research, in an interdisciplinary and collaborative fashion, on the nature and potential of the human mind. “We want to study the human mind by integrating the first-person and third-person research methods. For five, ten years, the experiences lived by skilled meditators will be monitored, shared, and discussed with cognitive scientists”. It’s a paradigmatic change for how we know, a revolution: going beyond the mind-body dualism, beyond the belief in scientific materialism according to which subjective experience is either physical or it doesn’t exist at all; going beyond any metaphysical belief that was never validated by scientific research.

**“At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, science excluded mental processes and states of consciousness experienced subjectively.** We know that mind and brain are clearly correlated in precise ways that have been revealed through progress in cognitive neuroscience, but the

exact nature of these correlations remains a mystery, a mystery veiled by the illusion of knowledge that the mind-body problem has already been solved.”

Many eminent scientists have already offered their support to the Renaissance of an open-minded, rigorous, contemplative research, made available by the understanding that both meditators and scientists are aware of the limits of their respective fields of research.

**The Scientific Advisory Board includes the Nobel Prize-winning biologist Elizabeth Blackburn (Director, Salk Institute),** neuroscientist and clinical psychologist David Presti (UC Berkeley), theoretical physicist Marcelo Gleiser (Director of the Institute for Cross-Disciplinary Engagement at Dartmouth College), and philosopher Michel Bitbol (Director of Research at the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique).

The project of the Center for Contemplative Research has its ‘roots’ in a scientific study known as the “*Shamatha Project*”, which began in 2007 and was aimed at analysing states of continuous single-pointed concentration and clarity: 60 participants have meditated full-time and have been “studied” by a team of cognitive scientists. Three months of full-time training have demonstrated to bring about an increase in attention, more compassion, trust and ability to regulate negative emotions.

**Our world is facing unprecedented crises: the radicalness and revolutionary intent of Alan Wallace’s project lies in tackling modern challenges by tapping into not only western knowledge but also the wisdom coming from the East.** The same challenges that are imperilling our very existence can help unite us in ways never seen before in human history.

In contrast to seeking happiness through hedonism alone – translated in a way of life in society centred on production and consumption, a way of life to which we have habituated ourselves – mindfulness, introspection, benevolence, loving kindness, empathetic joy are virtues that everybody should cultivate. Not only those in a position of power, in governments and board of directors, but also those that practice professional sports, without forgetting people working in the field of education – because it’s from education that we have to begin to fundamentally reassess our beliefs on the nature of human existence, our values, and the way in which we conduct our lives!

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