

HOW TO CULTIVATE MENTAL BALANCE AND WELL-BEING



Tushita Meditation Centre

November 04 2023 (15:00 – 16:30)

Teacher: Glen Svensson

MENTAL BALANCE AND WELL-BEING

Building Bridge Between Buddhism and Western Psychology

Mental Balance and Well-Being

Building Bridges Between Buddhism and Western Psychology

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Clinical psychology has focused primarily on the diagnosis and treatment of mental disease, and only recently has scientific attention turned to understanding and cultivating positive mental health. The Buddhist tradition, on the other hand, has focused for over 2,500 years on cultivating exceptional states of mental well-being as well as identifying and treating psychological problems. This article attempts to draw on centuries of Buddhist experiential and theoretical inquiry as well as current Western experimental research to highlight specific themes that are particularly relevant to exploring the nature of mental health. Specifically, the authors discuss the nature of mental well-being and then present an innovative model of how to attain such well-being through the cultivation of four types of mental balance: conative, attentional, cognitive, and affective.

Keywords: mental health, Buddhism, well-being, mental balance

Particularly since World War II, clinical psychology has focused primarily on the diagnosis and treatment of mental disease, and only recently has scientific attention turned to understanding and cultivating positive mental health (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). The Buddhist tradition, on the other hand, has concerned itself over the past 2,500 years with cultivating exceptional states of mental well-being as well as identifying and treating problems of the mind (Smith, 1991).

Toward a Dialogue

Although the records of the Buddha's discourses and later commentarial literature within the Buddhist tradition do not elaborate on the theme of "mental health" as such, they do discuss the nature and causes of mental imbalances and techniques for achieving mental well-being. This article draws on centuries of Buddhist experiential and theoretical inquiry to show how a dialogue with Western psychology can be mutually enriching and particularly relevant to current psychological interest in exploring the nature of positive mental health.

This article specifically focuses on Buddhism, because it is widely considered the most psychological of all spiritual traditions (Smith, 1991). Buddhism is fundamentally concerned with identifying the inner causes of human suffering, the possibility of freedom from suffering, and the means to realize such freedom. Unlike many religions, it does not begin with asserting faith in a supernatural being

but rather with investigating the nature of human experience (Wallace, 1999, 2003). Buddhism presents a worldview that is thoroughly integrated with a discipline of experiential inquiry into the nature of the mind and related phenomena, and it includes empirical, analytical, and religious elements (Segal, 2003). Thus, it can be relevant to philosophical and psychological theory and practice because of its intensive exploration of the mind and its psychological methods to cultivate sustained well-being.

To help open up collaborative dialogue between Buddhism and Western psychology, this article introduces a fourfold model of well-being, drawing from Buddhist teachings as well as Western psychology and research. We begin by introducing a definition of well-being, derived from core insights of the Buddha as well as current Western psychological theory and research. We then describe an innovative model of how to cultivate mental well-being, focusing on four types of mental balance: conative, attentional, cognitive, and affective. The model draws on traditional Buddhist theory as well as relevant Western psychological research to demonstrate how dialogue and empirical study can enrich both traditions.

Nature and Types of Buddhism

Although the Buddhist tradition stems from the teachings attributed to the historical Buddha, over the past 2,500 years it has become assimilated with a wide range of cultures throughout Asia, resulting in an equally wide range of sacred writings, theories, and practices. Broadly speaking, Buddhism is commonly classified in terms of Southeast Asian Theravada Buddhism, East Asian Mahayana Buddhism, and Indo-Tibetan Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism, each having its own unique characteristics and

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We thank the Mind and Life Institute, which invited the initial presentation that led to the current article; Richard Davidson, Paul Ekman, Benedict Friedman, Jonathan Heath, Margaret Kenney, Shauna Shapiro, and Diane Shapiro for their insightful feedback and suggestions; and those pioneering researchers who are exploring the interface between the world's constructive traditions and modern science, revealing new ways to alleviate human suffering and shedding fresh light on the human potential for genuine well-being.

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October 2006 • American Psychologist

Copyright 2006 by the American Psychological Association 0893-3200/06/\$12.00
Vol. 61, No. 10, 990-1001 DOI: 10.1037/0893-3200.61.10.990

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WHAT DO WE MEAN BY WELL-BEING?

"The goal of Buddhist practice is the realization of a state of well-being that is not contingent on the presence of pleasurable stimuli, either external or internal.

In this article, the well-being we are referring to is fundamentally different from hedonic well-being, which includes stimulus-driven pleasures of all kinds."

Two types of well-being

1. Stimulus-driven (pleasure)
2. Inner well-being (genuine happiness)

"Below we present a heuristic model that proposes that well-being arises from a mind that is balanced in four ways: conatively, attentionally, cognitively, and affectively."

MENTAL BALANCE AND WELL-BEING

1. The four types of mental balance
2. Motivational balance (conative)
3. Attentional balance
4. Cognitive balance
5. Emotional balance (affective)
6. Integrated approach
7. Cognitive fusion
8. Q & A

THE FOUR TYPES OF MENTAL BALANCE

1. Conative (motivational) balance

“a reality-based range of desires and aspirations oriented toward one’s own and others’ happiness”

2. Attentional balance

“the ability to sustain a voluntary flow of attention with a quality of awareness that is suffused by ease, focus, and clarity”

3. Cognitive balance

“entails engaging with the world of experience without imposing assumptions or ideas on events and thereby misapprehending or distorting them”

4. Affective (emotional) balance

“entails a freedom from excessive emotional vacillation, emotional apathy, and inappropriate emotions”

THE FOUR TYPES OF MENTAL BALANCE

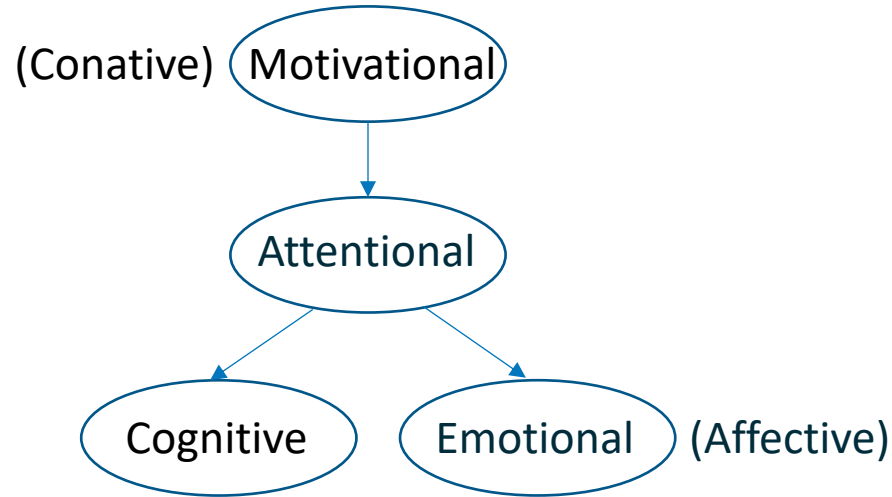
“The model is presented in a linear fashion, beginning with conative balance.

Conative balance precedes the other three in the process of cultivating mental well-being, because this factor is what allows people to set intentions, goals, and priorities. In effect, conative processes set the course for the cultivation of the other three mental balances.

Attentional balance is the next mental factor discussed, because attention is a necessary skill for achieving the final two factors, cognitive and affective balance. Without the ability to sustain attention, it is difficult to closely examine people’s moment-to-moment cognitive and affective processes.

Cognitive and affective balance are presented subsequently, as they can most effectively be achieved on the basis of the prior cultivation of conative and attentional balance.”

THE FOUR TYPES OF MENTAL BALANCE



Buddhist practices

1. Motivational (conative) – preliminary practices
2. Attentional – shamatha practice
3. Cognitive – vipashyana practice
4. Emotional (affective) – compassion practice

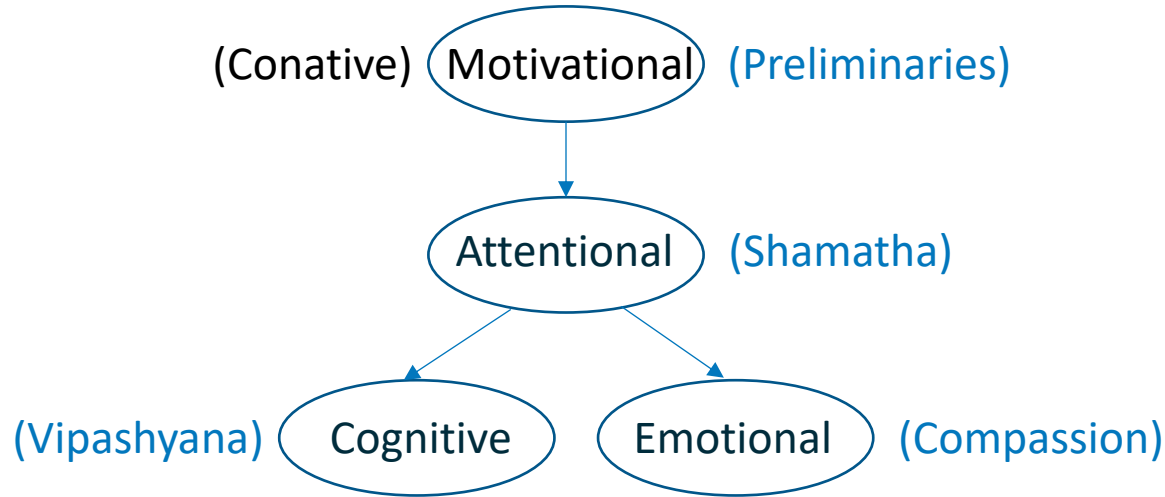
THE FOUR TYPES OF MENTAL BALANCE

“Below we describe each of the four mental balances. In an attempt to precisely operationalize them, we use a system of classification drawn from traditional Tibetan medicine, which defines physiological imbalances in terms of deficit, hyperactivity, and dysfunction. This system of classification is closely linked to Indo-Tibetan Buddhism.”

Three types of imbalance

1. Deficit – not enough
2. Hyperactivity – too much
3. Dysfunction – wrong type

1. MOTIVATIONAL BALANCE



“Conative balance is the first of the mental states discussed because of its central importance to all other mental states. If one does not develop conative balance—a reality-based range of desires and aspirations oriented toward one’s own and others’ happiness—then there will be little or no incentive to try to balance one’s attentional, cognitive, and affective faculties.”

1. MOTIVATIONAL BALANCE

Three types of imbalance

1. **Deficit** – *“A conative deficit occurs when people experience an apathetic loss of motivation for happiness and its causes.”*
2. **Hyperactivity** – *“Conative hyperactivity is present when people fixate on obsessive goals that obscure the reality of the present. People are so caught up in craving and fantasies about the future—about their unfulfilled desires—that their senses are dulled as to what is happening here and now.”*
3. **Dysfunction** – *“Finally, conative dysfunction sets in when people desire things that are detrimental to their own or others’ well-being and are indifferent to things that do contribute to their own and others’ well-being.”*

“Those desiring to escape from suffering hasten right toward their own misery. And with the very desire for happiness, out of delusion they destroy their own well-being as if it were the enemy.” Shantideva (8C)

1. MOTIVATIONAL BALANCE

Overcoming imbalances

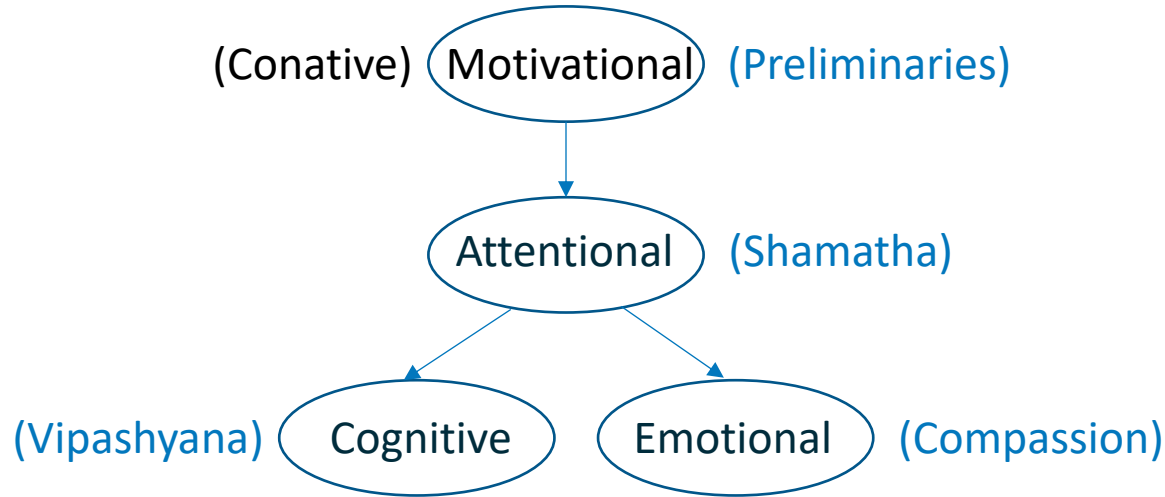
1. **Deficit** – *“remedy apathy by meditating on the realities of impermanence and suffering and the possibility of generating well-being by reflecting, for example, on the lives of those who have realized such fulfillment”*
2. **Hyperactivity** – *“remedy obsessive desire with the cultivation of contentment by reflecting on the transitory, unsatisfying nature of hedonic pleasures”*
3. **Dysfunction** – *“remedy mistaken goals with the experiential recognition of the true causes of both suffering and well-being”*

1. MOTIVATIONAL BALANCE

True causes of suffering and well-being?

1. **Source of suffering/happiness is outside** (ie. what happens to us)
 - pleasure = happiness, pain = suffering
 - difficult situations = problems
 - what we can get from the world → attachment to pleasure/aversion to pain
 2. **Source of suffering/happiness is inside** (ie. how we respond to what happens to us)
 - pleasure not= happiness, pain not= suffering
 - attachment to pleasure/aversion to pain → suffering
 - ***“Pain is inevitable. Suffering is optional.”***
 - difficult situations = opportunities
 - what we can bring to the world → loving-kindness/compassion
- *experiential recognition of the true causes of both suffering and well-being*

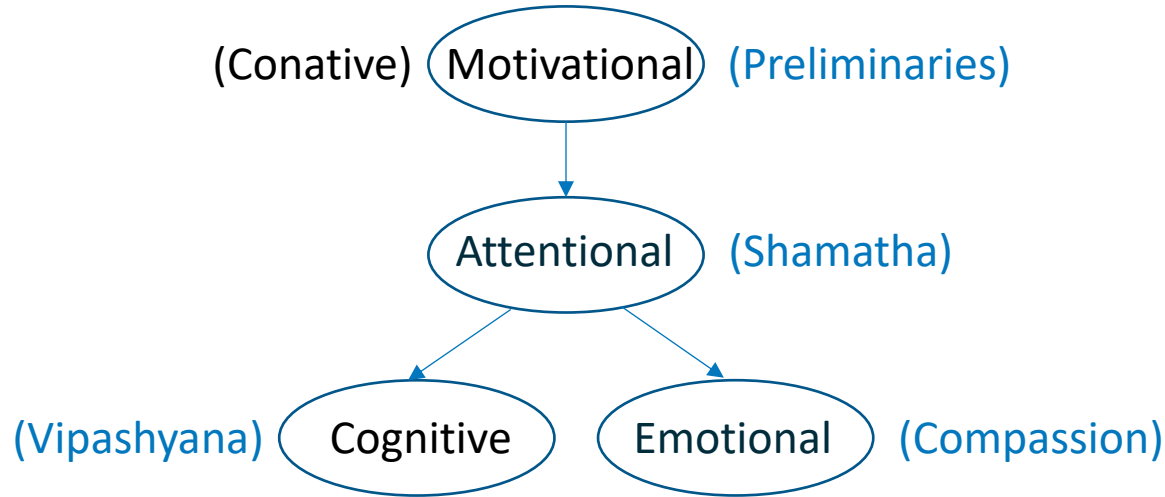
1. MOTIVATIONAL BALANCE



The result

*“The result of such conative balance is a **decrease** in interest in achieving an excess of such things as sensual pleasures, material acquisitions, and social status and a **growing commitment** to leading a meaningful and deeply satisfying life, qualified by a growing sense of well-being, understanding, and virtue.” (renunciation)*

2. ATTENTIONAL BALANCE



“Attentional balance is the next mental factor discussed, because attention is a necessary skill for achieving the final two factors, cognitive and affective balance. Without the ability to sustain attention, it is difficult to closely examine people’s moment-to-moment cognitive and affective processes.”

2. ATTENTIONAL BALANCE

Three types of imbalance

1. **Deficit** – *“An attentional deficit is characterized by the inability to focus vividly on a chosen object.”* (laxity)
2. **Hyperactivity** – *“Attentional hyperactivity occurs when the mind is excessively aroused, resulting in compulsive distraction and agitation.”* (excitation)
3. **Dysfunction** – *“Attention is dysfunctional when people focus on things in afflictive ways, those that are not conducive to their own or others’ well-being.”* (addressed in the other three areas of mental balance)

2. ATTENTIONAL BALANCE

Overcoming imbalances

“These imbalances (excitation and laxity) are remedied through the cultivation of

1. ***mindfulness***, which is defined in many Buddhist texts as sustained, voluntary attention continuously focused on a familiar object, without forgetfulness or distraction and
2. ***meta-attention***, the ability to monitor the state of the mind, swiftly recognizing whether one’s attention has succumbed to either excitation or laxity.”

The two tools

1. Mindfulness
2. Meta-attention (introspection) – quality control



2. ATTENTIONAL BALANCE

*“When **laxity** sets in, the primary remedy is to arouse the attention by taking a fresh interest in the object of meditation, whereas when the mind becomes **agitated**, the first thing to do is to relax more deeply.*

In this way, the attentional imbalances of laxity and excitation may be overcome.”

Laxity (dullness)

1. Refresh – interest in the practice
2. Restore – attention on the object
3. Retain – ongoing flow of mindfulness

Excitation (distraction)

1. Relax – body and mind
2. Release – the distraction
3. Return – to the object

2. ATTENTIONAL BALANCE

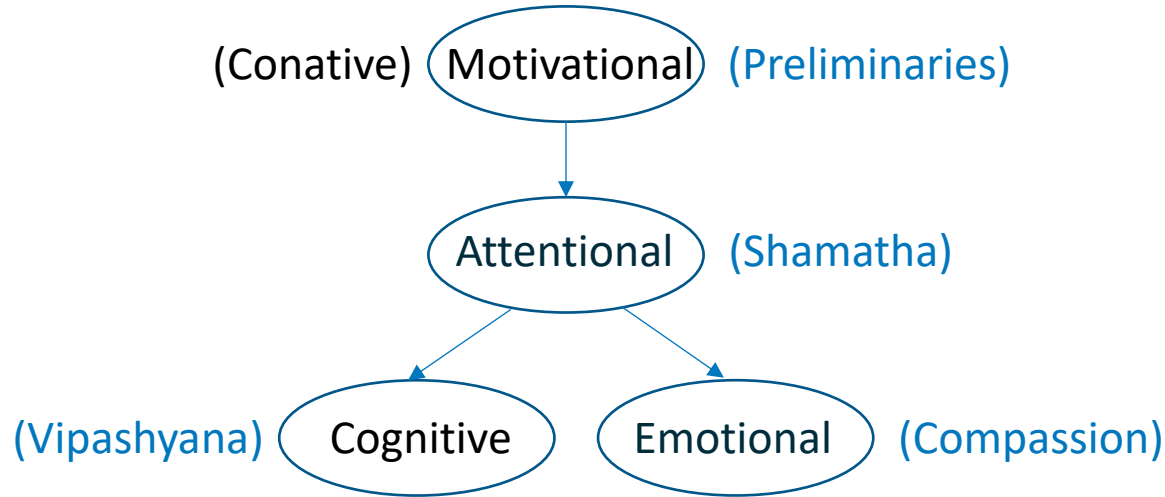
What object to focus on?

*“One of the most widespread Buddhist practices for developing attentional balance is **mindfulness of breathing**. In such practice,*

- 1. one may begin by focusing the attention on the tactile sensations of the respiration wherever they arise in the **entire body**;*
- 2. one may then more narrowly focus on the sensations of the rise and fall of the **abdomen** with each in- and out-breath; and*
- 3. in the most highly focused exercise, the attention may be directed to the sensations of the passage of the breath at the apertures of the **nostrils**.”*

*“In Buddhist attentional practice, one first emphasizes the cultivation of mental and physical **relaxation**; on that basis, attentional **stability** is highlighted, and finally one focuses on the development of attentional **vividness**.”*

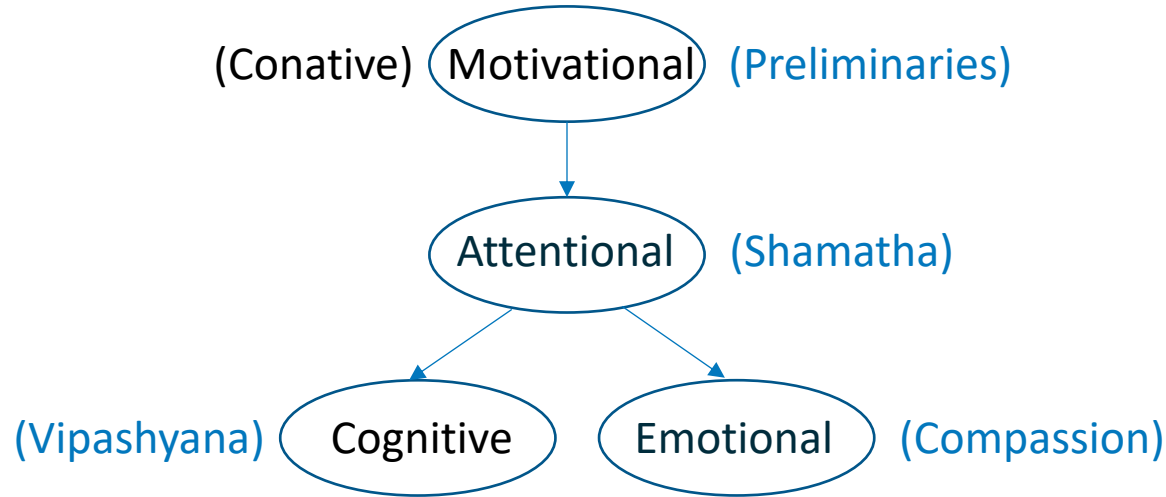
2. ATTENTIONAL BALANCE



The result

*“The result of such training is a state of attentional balance in which a **high level of attentional** arousal is maintained while remaining **deeply relaxed** and composed. For this reason, it is called meditative quiescence (shamatha). The mind is now free of both attentional laxity (deficit) and excitation (hyperactivity), and **it can be used effectively** for any task to which it is put.”*

3. COGNITIVE BALANCE



“Cognitive balance entails engaging with the world of experience without imposing conceptual assumptions or ideas on events and thereby misapprehending or distorting them. It therefore involves being calmly and clearly present with experience as it arises moment by moment.”

3. COGNITIVE BALANCE

Three types of imbalance

1. **Deficit** – *“At times, people are simply absent-minded.”*
2. **Hyperactivity** – *“On other occasions, they get caught up in their assumptions and expectations, failing to distinguish between perceived realities and their fantasies.”*
3. **Dysfunction** – *“And they are generally prone to misapprehending events in a myriad of ways due to cognitive deficit and hyperactivity imbalances.”*

*“A commonly cited example in Buddhism is mistaking a coiled rope for a snake. Because one does not initially perceive this object clearly (**cognitive deficit**), one is prone to projecting one’s fears or expectations on the object (**cognitive hyperactivity**), resulting in a misidentification of the object (**cognitive dysfunction**).”*

3. COGNITIVE BALANCE

Overcoming imbalances

“According to Buddhism, the distinguishing characteristic of what we are referring to as cognitive balance is that one views the world without the imbalances of cognitive hyperactivity, deficit, or dysfunction.

*Overcoming such cognitive imbalances is a central theme in Buddhist practice, where one of the primary interventions is the **application of discerning mindfulness** to whatever arises from moment to moment.*

*The faculty of **mindfulness**, as previously defined, is **initially cultivated** as a means to overcome attentional imbalances, and it is **then applied** to daily experience in order to achieve cognitive balance.”*

Mindfulness

- cultivating – attentional balance (shamatha practice)
- applying – cognitive balance (vipashyana practice)

3. COGNITIVE BALANCE

“The four applications of mindfulness to

- 1. the body,*
- 2. feelings,*
- 3. mental states and processes, and*
- 4. phenomena in general*

constitute the most fundamental system of meditative practice in Buddhism for achieving insight by means of overcoming cognitive imbalances.”

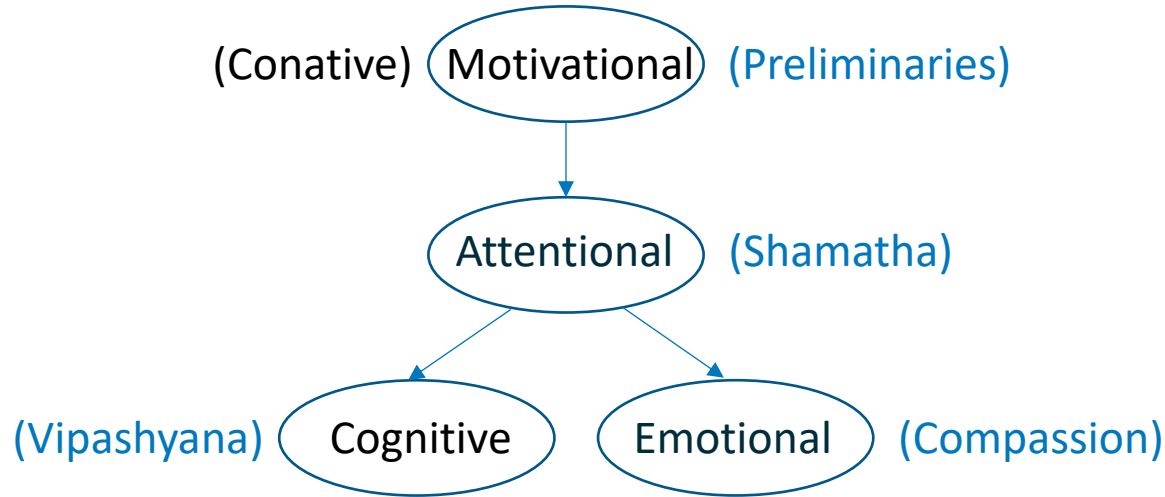
Cognitive imbalances

1. Changing as unchanging
2. Pleasure as happiness
3. No self as self
4. Dependent as independent

Insights (cognitive balance)

1. Impermanence
2. Suffering (duhkha)
3. No self
4. Emptiness

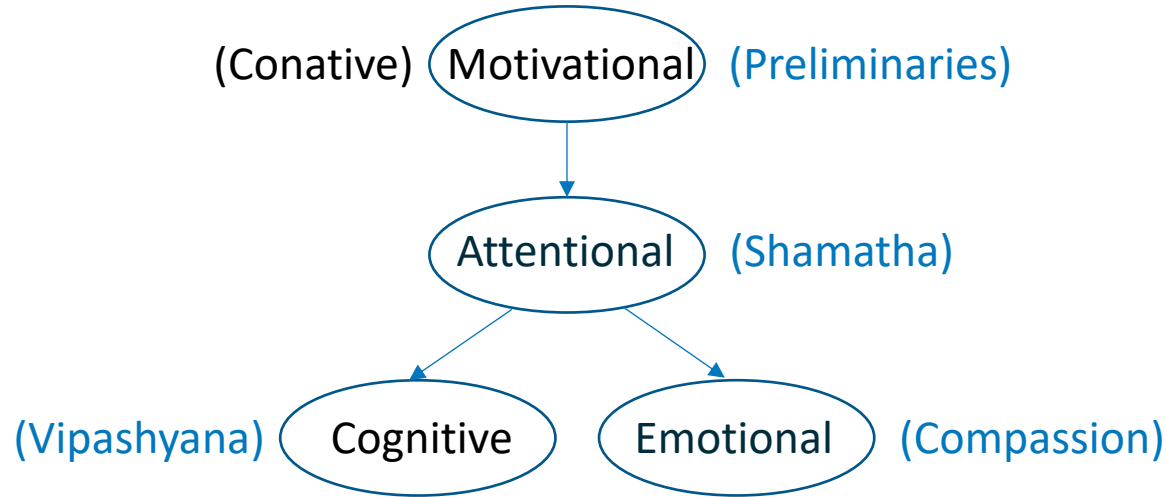
3. COGNITIVE BALANCE



The result

*“By means of such **close attentiveness** to one’s interactive presence with other people and the environment at large, problems of cognitive deficit are overcome, and by carefully observing what is perceptually presented to one’s senses, one learns to **distinguish** between the contents of perception and the conceptual superimpositions that one projects on one’s immediate experience of the world.”*

4. EMOTIONAL BALANCE



“Affective (emotional) balance entails a freedom from excessive emotional vacillation, emotional apathy, and inappropriate emotions.”

4. EMOTIONAL BALANCE

Three types of imbalance

1. **Deficit** – *“An affective deficit disorder has the symptoms of emotional deadness within and a sense of cold indifference towards others.”*
2. **Hyperactivity** – *“Affective hyperactivity is characterized by excessive elation and depression, hope and fear, adulation and contempt, and infatuation and aversion.”*
3. **Dysfunction** – *“Affective dysfunction occurs when people’s emotions are inappropriate to the circumstances at hand, for example, taking delight in someone else’s misfortune or being disgruntled at others’ success.”*

4. EMOTIONAL BALANCE

Overcoming imbalances

“Buddhism treats affective imbalances with many specific methods for countering such mental afflictions as craving, hostility, delusion, arrogance, and envy.”

Countering mental afflictions

1. **clear understanding of the mental affliction**
 - what it is and how it leads to suffering
2. **cultivating view of genuine happiness** (motivational balance – preliminaries)
 - underlying source of suffering/happiness lies within the mind
3. **applying mindfulness** (attentional balance – shamatha)
 - simply observing the mental affliction as it arises and hence free of it
 - mental affliction will simply dissipate by itself (not need to fight with it)
4. **applying specific antidotes** (cognitive balance – vipashyana)
 - impermanence, dependent-arising

4. EMOTIONAL BALANCE

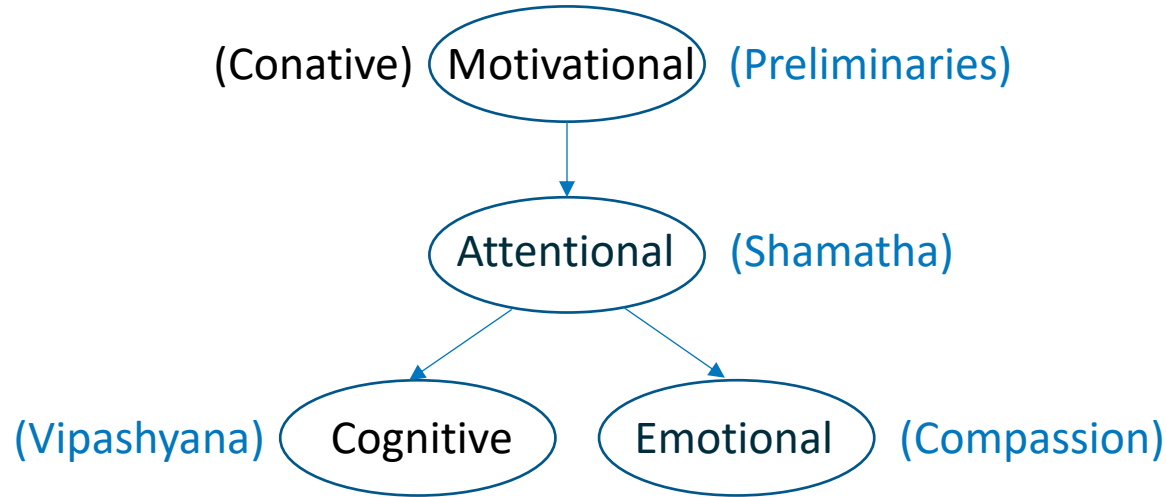
“In addition, Buddhism presents a system of meditative practices designed to counter emotional imbalance by cultivating the qualities of (a) loving-kindness, (b) compassion, (c) empathetic joy, and (d) equanimity.”

Compassion practice

1. **Loving-kindness** (*maitri*) – “May all living beings have happiness and it’s causes.”
2. **Compassion** (*karuna*) – “May they be free of suffering and it’s causes.”
3. **Empathetic joy** (*mudita*) – “May they never be separated from the happiness that is free from suffering.”
4. **Equanimity** (*upeksha*) – “May they abide in equanimity, free of attachment and aversion to those near and far.”

→ responding with loving-kindness/compassion instead of reacting out of attachment/aversion

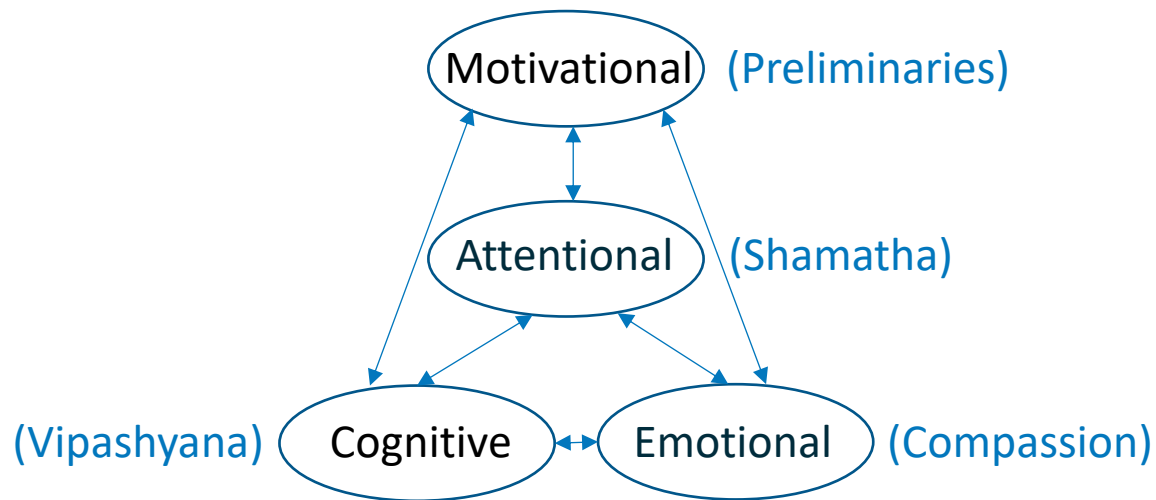
4. EMOTIONAL BALANCE



The result

*“Emotional balance is achieved when one has **awareness** of one’s own and others’ emotions, emotional triggers, and emotional behaviours as they arise and making **wise** choices while **engaging** with emotional experience.”*

INTEGRATED APPROACH



*“Although we present the model in a linear procession, we are not suggesting any kind of strict linearity among these four elements of mental balance. All components of the model are interconnected. The model represents a systemic and dynamic process of evolving toward well-being. Therefore, although we describe each of the mental balances below as individual factors, it is important to note that **as balance is gained in one area, it affects the other three.**”*

INTEGRATED APPROACH

1. Motivational balance (preliminaries)

“If one does not develop conative balance—a reality-based range of desires and aspirations oriented toward one’s own and others’ happiness—then there will be little or no incentive to try to balance one’s attentional, cognitive, and affective faculties.”

“Those desiring to escape from suffering hasten right toward their own misery. And with the very desire for happiness, out of delusion they destroy their own well-being as if it were the enemy.” Shantideva (8C)

INTEGRATED APPROACH

2. Attentional balance (shamatha practice)

“Attentional balance is the next mental factor discussed, because attention is a necessary skill for achieving the final two factors, cognitive and affective balance.”

- no attentional balance → very difficult to cultivate cognitive & emotional balance
 - ie. no shamatha → very difficult to cultivate wisdom & compassion
- no motivational balance → shamatha practice = McM mindfulness
 - “There’s a strong tendency to take our current way of life as the norm, and then to add meditation to fix it, like a Band-Aid applied to a festering wound.”
- no cognitive & emotional balance → very difficult to make progress in attentional balance due to mental afflictions
- attentional balance → will enable deeper level of motivational, cognitive & emotional balance

INTEGRATED APPROACH

3. Cognitive balance (vipashyana practice)

4. Emotional balance (compassion practice)

“Cognitive and affective balance are presented subsequently, as they can most effectively be achieved on the basis of the prior cultivation of conative and attentional balance.”

- no attentional balance → very difficult to cultivate cognitive/emotional balance
 - ie. very difficult to gain insights or to cultivate loving-kindness/compassion
- no emotional balance (ie. wisdom without compassion)
 - not grounded → self-absorbed, disconnected, insensitive to others suffering, unethical
- no cognitive balance (ie. compassion without wisdom)
 - not in touch with reality → biased, unskilful actions, ‘compassion’ burnout, get taken advantage of

COGNITIVE FUSION (COGNITIVE IMBALANCE)

Why do we get angry with others who behave badly?

And how to transform anger into compassion?

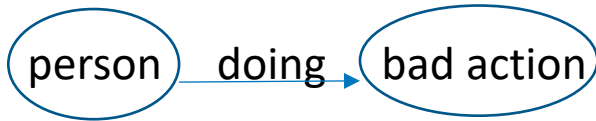
Where does low self-esteem and self-hatred come from?

And how to overcome low self-esteem?

COGNITIVE FUSION (COGNITIVE IMBALANCE)

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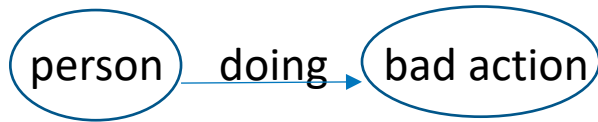
Correct perspective



COGNITIVE FUSION (COGNITIVE IMBALANCE)

Why do we get angry with others who behave badly? False perspective

Correct perspective



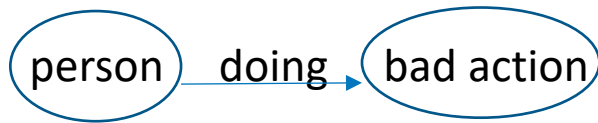
Cognitive fusion (false/invalid perspective)



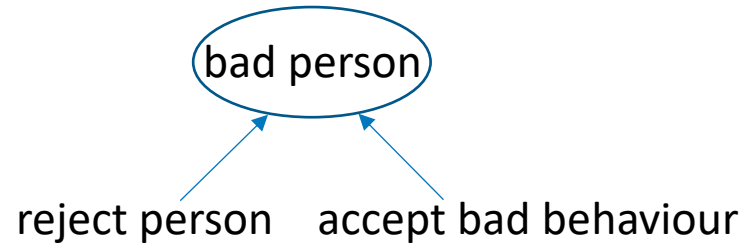
COGNITIVE FUSION (COGNITIVE IMBALANCE)

Why do we get angry with others who behave badly?

Correct perspective



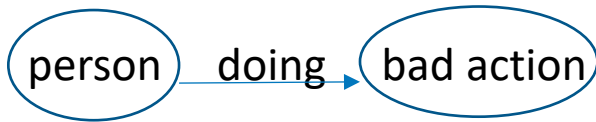
Cognitive fusion (false/invalid perspective)



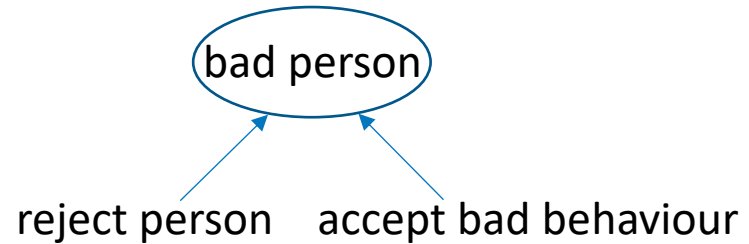
COGNITIVE FUSION (COGNITIVE IMBALANCE)

Why do we get angry with others who behave badly?

Correct perspective



Cognitive fusion (false/invalid perspective)

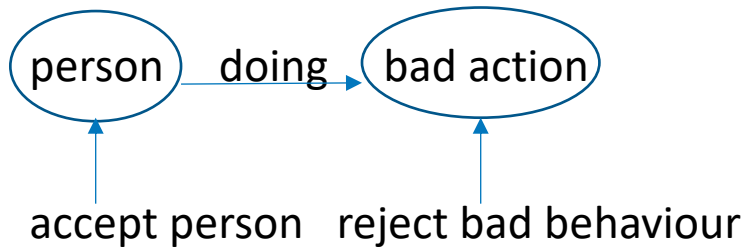


- judging/condemning the person
- forgiveness/compassion very difficult
- fixed biased view of the person
- leads to conflict (ie. us vs them)

COGNITIVE FUSION (COGNITIVE IMBALANCE)

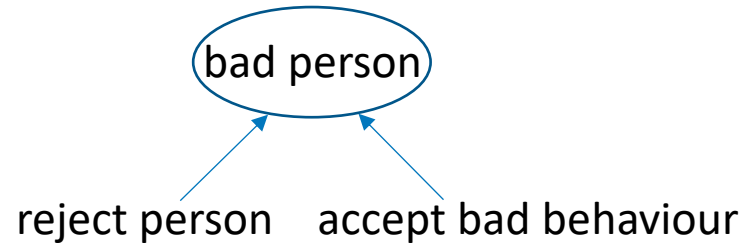
How to transform anger into compassion? Adopt the correct perspective

Correct perspective



- evaluating the behaviour
- compassion more easy
- balanced view of person
- leads to co-operation

Cognitive fusion (false/invalid perspective)



- judging the person
- compassion becomes very difficult
- fixed biased view of the person
- leads to conflict (ie. us vs them)

COGNITIVE FUSION (COGNITIVE IMBALANCE)

Where does low self-esteem and self-hatred come from?

Correct perspective



COGNITIVE FUSION (COGNITIVE IMBALANCE)

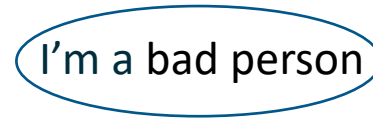
Where does low self-esteem and self-hatred come from?

- cognitive fusion + obsessive focus on the negative

Correct perspective



Cognitive fusion (false/invalid perspective)



COGNITIVE FUSION (COGNITIVE IMBALANCE)

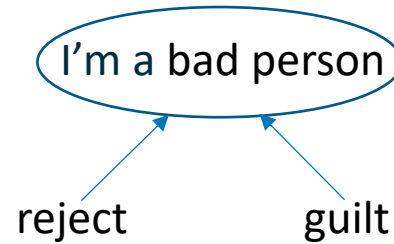
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Correct perspective



Cognitive fusion (false/invalid perspective)



COGNITIVE FUSION (COGNITIVE IMBALANCE)

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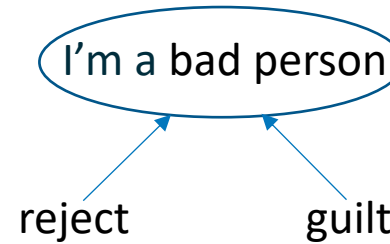


How to overcome low self-esteem?

Simply focus on the positives?

Danger of cognitive fusion

Cognitive fusion (false/invalid perspective)

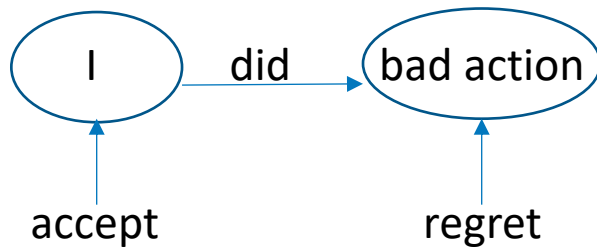


- judging/criticising ourselves
- condemnation/self-hatred
- low self-esteem (fixed biased view)
- guilt → not addressing behaviour

COGNITIVE FUSION (COGNITIVE IMBALANCE)

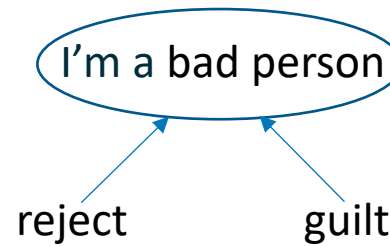
How to overcome low self-esteem? Adopt the correct perspective

Correct perspective



- evaluating our behaviour
- forgiveness/compassion
- good self-esteem (balanced view)
- regret → addressing behaviour

Cognitive fusion (false/invalid perspective)



- judging/criticising ourselves
- condemnation/self-hatred
- low self-esteem (fixed biased view)
- guilt → not addressing behaviour

Q & A

Questions?