

## Book Review

# Review of B. Alan Wallace & Brian Hodel's Book: *Embracing Mind: The Common Ground of Science and Spirituality*

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### ABSTRACT

Wallace (and Hodel) do a very good job in "Embracing Mind." They break the book down into three parts. In Part One, Wallace takes another look at science, and where science may drift off into scientism. In Part Two, Wallace looks at a more promising science that can study the mind. In Part Three, Wallace takes up "tools and technologies of a Buddhist science of contemplation. You can find this book at Amazon [http://www.amazon.com/Embracing-Mind-Common-Science-Spirituality/dp/1590304829/ref=cm\\_cr-mr-title](http://www.amazon.com/Embracing-Mind-Common-Science-Spirituality/dp/1590304829/ref=cm_cr-mr-title) .

**Key Words:** science, spirituality, mind, common ground, scientism, buddhist.

In Part One, Wallace takes another look at science, and where science may drift off into scientism. Wallace (page 22) tells us where scientific materialism carries hidden metaphysical assumptions - "what did that interpretation boil down to? The five principles examined previously: objectivism, metaphysical realism, the closure principle, universalism, and physical reductionism." Without going into detail what the principles entail, I will merely summarize what Wallace (page 23) concludes: "So strong was their enthusiasm for an all-embracing scientific worldview that they often allowed their hopes, dreams, and beliefs to masquerade as facts. They were especially impressed with Darwin's theory of natural selection. According to their own interpretation, natural selection meant that organisms best suited to win the competition for scarce resources survived, passing on their advantageous traits to succeeding generations."

Wallace (page 24) writes: "Social philosophers influenced by scientific materialism created social Darwinism, the view that nations and individuals competed for economic supremacy in an arena where only the 'favored races' or toughest individuals would succeed. There was no room here for any softness or idealism and, of course, such a philosophy gave at least tacit approval to war, imperialism, and racism. In like manner, Karl Marx reduced all aspects of culture to economics."

Writing on modernity, with its scientific progress, Wallace (page 25) writes: "We have been exposed to this philosophy throughout our lives - in the classroom, in the media, by our doctors, and through the decisions of government agencies ruling on health, the environment, and elsewhere. It has been pounded into us consistently for so long that we've come to accept it as common sense. This, we are told, is what 'non-believers' accept as truth."

Wallace (page 75) writes on the study of mind and brain: "It wasn't until the late nineteenth century that science attempted a formal study of the mind. Given the enormous influence of scientific materialism, it is not surprising that a physical approach - the study of behavior and the brain, the 'gray matter' - held sway. By the early twentieth century, nonmaterial qualities attributed to the mind (thoughts, feelings, images, dreams, and so on) were neatly avoided by correlating them to the

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physical brain, with its internal physiology, and to physical behavior. This, mind was simply redefined as the brain."

Wallace (page 82) writes: "By relying on the argument of mere correlations between mental phenomena and brain physiology, cognitive psychologists remind us of astrologers, who rely on correlates between patterns in the heavens and events on earth, rather than astronomers, who have actually explored the skies scientifically with telescopes."

Wallace (page 83) writes: "Shouldn't cognitive scientists first be experts on their own consciousness, deeply exploring their subjective nature, before they tackle the complexities of the mind-brain connection? Given the rigors of science, wouldn't such self-knowledge be useful for scientists in general? After all, the scientific mind behind the eyepiece of a physical instrument (and behind the devising of theories) is the fundamental instrument of all science. Must not this ultimate black box be opened and carefully examined if science wants to be certain that its theories and data are something more than complex imaginings or projections?"

Wallace (page 84) concludes: "The preceding discussion should make it clear that science's attitude toward the mind has been hampered by historical baggage. According to the dictates of its Christian background, science explored outer, objective phenomena and avoided the inner, subjective realm. Lack of self knowledge hampered scientists by blinding them to subjective distortions that have prejudiced the scientific enterprise."

Wallace (page 102-103) writes: "What of those students who do take an interest in science, believing that the practice of science follows the open-minded, exploratory spirit of the scientific method? They study textbooks that either imply or boldly declare that as-yet-unproven theories are definitely true or will certainly be proven true in the future. They are exposed to an attitude toward science that promotes conformity to the foregone conclusions of scientific materialism even as it pretends to favor free inquiry. Those people who see the contradiction are left with the choice of buckling under or striking out on their own. Alternatively, they may become discouraged with science altogether and choose another career."

Wallace (page 105) writes: "The materialist approach to medicine has led to the desire for a 'quick fix' - just pop a pill and let chemicals take care of it. Drug, tobacco, and alcohol addiction follow the same logic. There may be more to mental and physical illness than just chemicals, but the physical bias of scientific materialism has largely marginalized alternative therapies that show promise."

In Part Two, Wallace looks at a more promising science that can study the mind. Wallace (page 142-143) writes: "Through intense and lengthy practice, the attention can be honed into a precision tool that, figuratively speaking, lights up the mind's interior. First one undergoes a sustained, rigorous training in developing stability and vividness of attention. One then uses one's enhanced powers of mental perception to learn to distinguish between the phenomena that are presented to the senses (including the sixth sense of mental perception) and the conceptual superimpositions that one under normal circumstances compulsively projects upon those phenomena."

Wallace (page 144) writes: "A guilty conscience is no more conducive to contemplative practice than nervous agitation or drowsiness."

Wallace (page 155) writes: "The Middle Way proposes an alternative explanation for the appearance of phenomena of the universe - regularities. Certain things tend to occur together or in a sequence. Whereas causes imply to us some power to affect, the Middle Way defines appearances as mere regularities."

Wallace (page 156) writes: "If we conceive of one stage as an absolute, permanent, independent entity, by definition it cannot have any relationship to anything else. By definition, two completely self-contained, independent, permanent, absolute things cannot affect one other. If they did, they wouldn't be self-contained, independent, and so on. But if we back off that position and say that there is simply a 'relationship' between them, Middle Way philosophers will point out that we are now viewing these things (such as seed and sprout) as relative, conventional realities. A relationship composed of regularities doesn't require absolute realities or absolute causality, and the relationship itself lacks any such inherent existence independent of the things that are related. Seed and sprout and their causal relationship, though existing conventionally, are now seen as 'empty of' absolute existence."

In Part Three, Wallace takes up "tools and technologies of a Buddhist science of contemplation." Wallace (page 213) writes: "From a Buddhist standpoint our mental afflictions, or distortions, stand in the way of enlightenment. From an empirical or scientific standpoint, such biases impede the search for truth, especially since the mind is truly the primary scientific instrument. Whether we are trying to use the mind and scientific instruments to probe stars and galaxies or we wish to understand the nature and workings of the mind itself, our mental projections and illusions of knowledge cloud the picture."

## References

B. Alan Wallace & Brian Hodel, 2008, *Embracing Mind: The Common Ground of Science and Spirituality*, Shambhala.