

THE TIDES OF WELL-BEING

by Mary Cameron



As I contemplated the meaning of well-being one early morning in my south Florida home, I heard the sweet sound of infant well-being over the baby monitor in my bedroom. My 8-month old twins were *talking* to each other through their crib rails and across the short space separating them in their nursery. A sister and brother develop the greatest of human traits, language, by comforting each other with assurances that they were not alone in the dawn. I see them gradually develop the roots of compassion as one shows concern in his face when the other cries with a particular poignancy. I am not a developmental psychologist, and it is possible that my conclusions are not scientifically sound; but I also do not believe that science plays a particularly significant role in achieving true well-being. Science may provide us with explanations of *laws of nature*, but it cannot practice them for us. My first and only meditation teacher, S. N. Goenka, is fond of telling the story of a typically unhappy person, a Nobel Prize-winning physicist who developed the bubble chamber with which to measure the phenomenal rapidity of subatomic particles (Hart, 1987). His discovery provided a metaphor for the rising and passing away of sensations at the root of the experience of *anicca*, impermanence, to be perceived and understood in Vipassana meditation practice. The wavelets of matter—energy have properties like the bubble chamber's subatomic particles. Unless the scientist also performed the courageous and compassionate work of sitting meditation, he was unlikely to come out of his suffering as was the inanimate bubble chamber that produced the first *evidence* of matter as energy. We can be grateful to science for the many times during the day it makes life convenient for us, and in fact save our lives. But its technological pharmacological fixes provide temporary happiness, inequitably available to people of the world. Well-being is not dependent on material advantage, but on the knowledge of a desirable state of balance and a determination (right effort) to get there.

Well-being, in the words of holistic health and integrative medicine guru Andrew Weil, is the enduring ability to remain balanced and not to become overwhelmed in the face of life's ups and downs. In the face of overwhelming stress or even unbearable tragedy, well-being is a longed-for state that one has confidence can eventually be regained. The confidence comes from a trust in practices that restore health of the body, the focus of the mind, and the expansiveness of the soul, to produce such states as joy and peace, love and compassion, creativity and hard work, motivation and energy. Well-being may recede but knowing it is there gives us hope of recovery and healing. I longed for well-being during the early months of my babies' lives, when the fatigue, irritability, and physical exhaustion of nursing and caring for them once made me glimpse chaos at the edge of my consciousness. I remember consciously holding on to a thought, a single thread of hope, so as not to go over the edge. (Other mothers have confirmed a similar experience.) After my first full night's sleep, I felt reborn (and now I understand why children's books have drawings and stories of the caterpillar that turns into

a butterfly!) From there I could slowly rebuild my sense of well-being and feel the joy of watching small humans move with intention and gradually develop into complex little people.

Well-being is an enduring, grounded state that we continually bring ourselves back to, like the meditator patiently bringing her attention back to simple breathing, calming the erratic and diffuse thoughts that swell the mind. Well-being is not meditation or prayer or yoga, but it may know and use these practices to maintain itself. Nor is well-being as singular and momentous as an epiphany, though it may unwittingly assist such serendipity. Rather, well-being is like the wisdom of an elder that we have cultivated in ourselves, that we own as something developed over time, and includes in a very basic way the things that keep us balanced.

Well-being is like a good parent, soft but firm. To paraphrase Buddhist teacher Pema Chodro, one has two choices as one grows and changes: one may develop a thick skin and keep people and events at bay, in a recessed part of consciousness (Chodron, 1997). Or, alternatively and preferably, one can become increasingly soft and vulnerable, nonjudgmental and open to all life offers. This allows the acceptance of what Buddhism identifies as the First Noble Truth, the inevitable presence of suffering (Rahula, 1974). The preferred choice, not an easy one, is like the flow of energy that many schools of spirituality describe as a by-product of focused meditation and prayer. It is the expanded perspective that can only come when one faces the enemy and realizes, as the Dalai Lama teaches us, that the enemy is one's best friend, because of the opportunity they provide to consider broader ideas and new approaches (The Fourteenth Dalai Lama, 1997). The comfortable is just that, a place where one is at rest and maybe a bit lazy, and while comfort and contentedness can replenish and restore us, they are friends to whom we can become too easily attached and miss when gone. To understand well-being one must have the wisdom to know that the comfortable, too, will pass, and not to be overwhelmed when it does.

Well-being in its common parlance, strikes me as a European western concept because it is located within a construct of the person with discrete boundaries and autonomous will, the *individual*. To think of well-being in other cultural contexts can open up alternative meanings of the person, as perhaps a *dividual* connected in tangible and significant ways to other beings, seen and unseen. In such contexts, one's well-being is not solely or only one's own responsibility but involves the caring of family and community. The power of other's caring in achieving a kind of well-being is profoundly described in the book *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*. There the true story is told of an epileptic Hmong immigrant girl who is tragically plunged into a vegetative comatose state from a grand mal seizure, and, against the prognosis by her doctors and nurses of her imminent death, lives on for years at home in the loving care of her parents, siblings and extended family, who become the living replacement of the life-support technology provided for her in the hospital.

Like the fluids of the Ayurvedic humoral system, well-being is in a state of dynamic balance. We experience our lives as complex and dynamically interacting layers of physical, emotional, mental, social, familial, economic, and spiritual realities. Well-being is also a dynamic state of attention to all of those layers, as some retreat and some advance, calling for our attention like a child with a hurt finger. As an anthropologist, I have always been interested in how cultures think of these layers differently. Are some more important than others? Have different cultures identified layers that we in our culture do not recognize or label? Does it matter to the well-being of the family in one's life to have more words and more rituals surrounding family and kinship and the ancestors? Is our Eastern western culture particularly rich in the language of emotions, evolved simultaneously with the desire to scientifically understand the *individual*? We can compare and contrast across the world's cultures in this way, in an intellectual effort that can be stimulating and interesting.

To extend the model developed by Carl Rogers for the kind of therapist who can promote positive and mature change in a client, well-being is like *becoming*, a state that develops with increasing congruence—it is the ability to express accurately in language or other symbolic form one's intangible, emotional states — and unconditional positive regard for the self (Rogers, 1961). Congruence is a direct correspondence between feeling and expression, an honest anchor with a direct line to the deep ocean floor of truth, as one knows it and experiences it. Well-being is like congruence and positive regard, free of evaluation and judgment; it allows one to increasingly understand and accept the self.



References

- Chodron, Pema. 1997. *When Things Fall Apart: Heart A vice for Difficult Times*. Boston: Shambala.
- Fadiman, Anne. 1997. *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down: A Humong Child, Her American Doctors, and the Collision of Two Cultures*. New York: The Noonday Press.
- Fourteenth Dalai Lama, The. 1997. *Kindness, Clarity and Insight*. Ithaca: Snow Lion.
- Hart, William. 1987. *The Art of Living: Vipassana Meditation as Taught by S.N. Goenka*. San Francisco: Harper Collins Publishing.
- Rahula, Walpola. 1974. *What The Buddha Taught*. New York: Grove Press.
- Rogers, Carl. 1961. *On Becoming a Person*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.

the expectations of
 stigation into issues
 health as well as those
 communication,
 The biological, chem-
 workings of the hu-
 ed as though they
 c lands discovered
 e Genome Project,
 the universe, via the
 eated in outer space.
 wn on Mars to
 life-blood; and set
 the news of the day.

ishments appear

visually and mentally,
 omputer, radio and
 Our awareness of one
 tha ever now,

ease. Social and pol-
 in the world. The
 n Afghanistan and
 pictures of violence,
 unrest. Our striving
 the quiet heart f
 ind, makes it hard
 rd.



nto this arena Wycross invited two artist/printmakers to
 produce images of what wellbeing means for this new century, and
 of an essayist to tell us in words.

Ed Paschke, born and raised in Chicago, is associated with
 the *Chicago imagist* group. He brings us *Rossa* and *Rosso*, two
 multicolored lithographs on Somerset, developed from crow-quill
 pen and ink drawings. More of his work can be seen on the
 web at www.edpaschke.com.

Eric Avery, M. D. brings us *Baby Boomer Health Prevention
 Certificate* and *The Neural Self*. Also two multicolored litho-
 graphs on Somerset, but developed from linoleum cuts. Eric is
 an Associate clinical Professor of Psychiatry and Behavioral
 Sciences and an associate member of The Medical Branch in
 Galveston, Texas. More about Eric and his work as an artist
 can be found on the web at www.DOCART.com.

Mary Cameron, our essayist, is a practitioner of Vipassana
 meditation as taught by S. N. Goenka. She is married to Jhanak
 Thapaliya and the mother of twins. Her essay, set in 16th
 century Plantin, 14 point with a Jensen initial letter designed by
 William Morris, is printed on Mohawk text. Mary is Director of
 Women's Studies center and Associate Professor of Anthropology,
 Florida State University in Boca Raton.