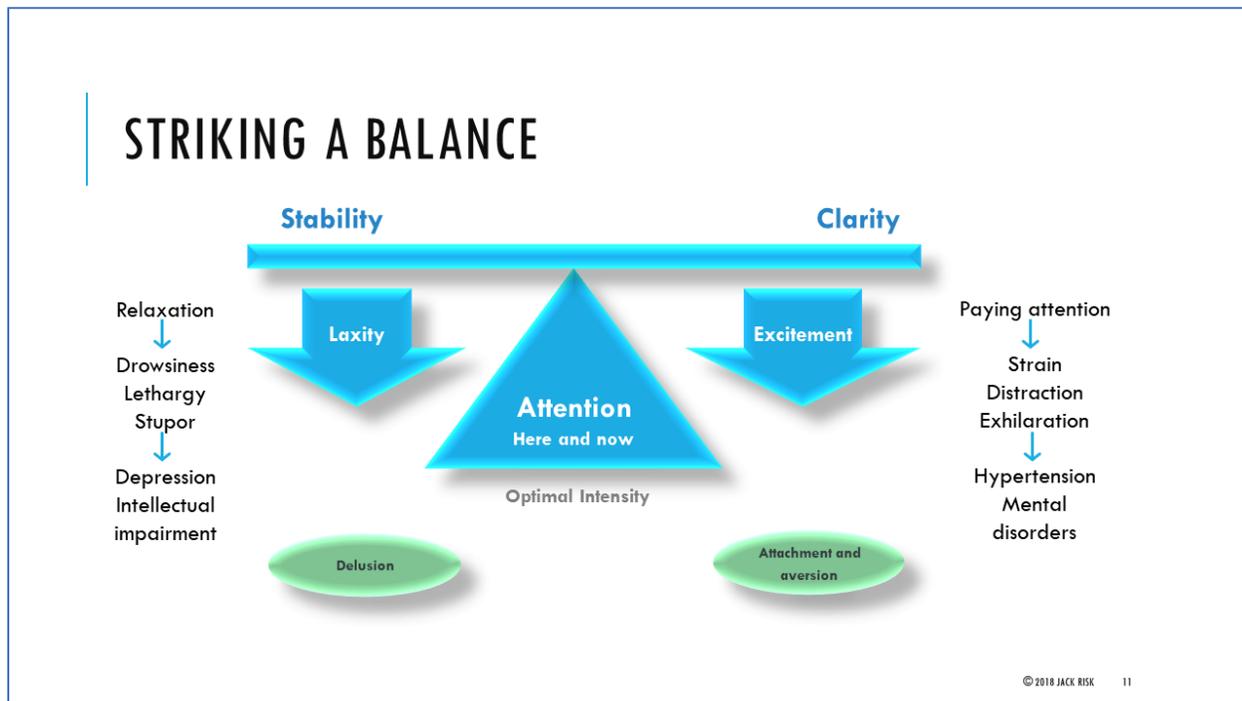


# A Balanced Mind



The question of mental health and its relation to meditation is a large one. I can only touch on areas of it that are within my limited experience and expertise.

I have based the diagram above on a work of Tsongkhapa and a commentary on it by B. Alan Wallace in his book *Balancing the Mind: A Tibetan Buddhist Approach to Refining Attention* (Boston: Snow Lion, 2005). Tsongkhapa (1357–1419) was the founder of the Gelug sect of Tibetan Buddhism and is considered one of the preeminent thinkers in all of Buddhism. His book *Small Exposition of the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment* contains a powerful explanation of what meditation is, how to do it and what its effects are. He was writing out of the collective experience of huge monastic universities in which thousands were trained in meditation over the course of centuries. The knowledge of the human mind in all its states of health and ill-health that was accumulated within those communities was drawn on in his writings and those of other masters. Wallace, in our own time, is one of those who has championed the conjunction of science and Buddhism.

Some of the concepts included in the diagram have to do with using meditation to balance the mind. But on a larger scale it provides a model of the human mind and the kind of balance that is required to maintain a healthy mind. To upset the balance, in either direction, opens the possibility of ill-health. The meditative factors—stability and clarity and how they are achieved through settling and focusing—are there both as warnings and remedies. You can get into trouble with too much of either and you can get out of trouble by re-establishing balance through meditation.

I find the diagram gives a pretty accurate notion of the poles between which the human mind tries to balance itself. Depression and psychosis are, in a realistic sense, the extremes of imbalance and all human beings hover somewhere between them. Most of us are fortunate enough to enjoy life within the safe zone of the bell curve of “normality.” But we also know that the balance can be fragile. If there are dangers to be encountered in meditation, of course, the risk is much greater for persons already suffering from mental disturbance.

I am privileged to have had among my students people with delusional psychosis and, at the other end of the scale, people suffering clinical depression. I am happy that I was able to play a part in their regaining some measure of health.

Tibetan Buddhist medicine and Traditional Chinese Medicine have always been aware of mental illness and each has had a range of remedies. Since at least the mid-twentieth century there has been a history of prominent Zenists and others who have been interested in applying Buddhist meditation in psychiatric situations. We are living in a bit of a hay day of applications of “mindfulness” in all sorts of medical fields. Studies are proliferating.

As students of Master Yap, we should also be cognizant of the relation that qigong bears to matters of mental health. For some time, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM IV) contained a category called *Qigong Psychosis*. It has since been removed but that may have something to do with the dying down of the “qigong fever” that hit China from the sixties through the nineties—when it was squelched by the Communist Party for political reasons. Amongst the hundreds of millions who were practicing qigong, there were a considerable number of people becoming overly excited and delusional through improper exercises. There are stories of the back wards filling up. Master Yap insists that most of what was being taught as qigong was based on misunderstandings of the principles. He has (and I have) always said that qigong has nothing to do with “absorbing energy” or with breathing exercises or focused intention. These notions that are put forward in all sorts of books and videos are incorrect. They can also be dangerous. People who practise this way run the real risk of a) wasting their time, and b) becoming unhealthy. The upward welling fire that Traditional Chinese Medicine talks about with regard to mental illness is the same energy that can be released by qigong if there is not a safe downward flow established.

How much more serious is it when we are working directly with the mind? When I am teaching qigong, I always stress the possibility that things might arise that are unfamiliar or unsettling—memories of traumatic events, old resentments, the re-emergence of physical injuries, strong emotions that are hard to explain etc. I need to be clear that this applies with regard to meditation, as well. There is a whole range of things that might be stored within us that our normal thinking minds are not in touch with. The healing process involves clearing out whatever emerges. Some things, when they come out, might be scary, disorienting or depressing. Alternatively, it’s possible to have exhilarating experiences that might indicate imbalance—visions, voices, bright lights, an inflated sense of self, seeing gods or devils etc.

Is there anything we need to be afraid of, in general, when it comes to practicing meditation? No. The CFQ that Master Yap developed is healthy and balanced. Meditation as taught in the traditions I am introducing in this course is healthy and has one of its stated purposes to balance the mind. There is virtually zero possibility of becoming unhealthy, either mentally or physically, when we practice qigong or meditation according to how they are being taught. Try to rid yourself of any such fear. It would present an impediment to your practice.

With all the studies looking into the beneficial applications of meditation, it is interesting that a literature search turns up almost nothing on adverse reactions or counterindications. Here is one study you might find interesting that does discuss some adverse reactions: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmedhealth/behindtheheadlines/news/2017-05-26-does-meditation-carry-a-risk-of-harmful-side-effects/>.

**Nevertheless, if you are experiencing anything that concerns you about your reactions to meditation, I would ask you to contact me directly so that we can talk about it and see how you might deal with it. My contact information is on my website: <http://www.jackrisk.ca/Contact.html>.**

There is a right-wing Christian argument that sometimes surfaces to the effect that all emptiness practices are rooted in the devil and inherently dangerous. Such thinking makes use of bad theology and worse interpretation of Scripture. Fundamentally, it is based in an exclusivist worldview fuelled by racism. Scare tactics on the part of ignorant people.

You will learn new things about yourself in your meditation practice. Many people are surprised to learn, for instance that they perceive light when they meditate—interior light. This is a common occurrence, a normal function of the

human brain and nothing to be alarmed or excited about. In fact, if you experience light, you can use it to anchor your attention within the body while, simultaneously, detaching from the phenomenon.

If you are confronted with disturbing occurrences in meditation, you might want to take action to calm yourself—breathing, qigong, going for a walk, talking to someone etc. Remember that practicing detachment is the appropriate response to all such occurrences and is the way to clear the karma that lies behind them. Don't waste time trying to analyze them or understand them. Simply let go of them.

Meditation can help to improve mental health as long as we understand the principle of balance and are careful to apply it in our practice. There is a broader context to working on mental health, of course, and there are other things that can help—improving one's life circumstances, building social supports, removing disturbing influences, receiving treatment etc.

But the dangers that lurk in the human mind ought to remind us all of the seriousness of the work we have undertaken when we become meditators.

We need to be clear that meditation is not an escape from life. It provides no place to hide from responsibilities or risks. It is not a talisman to protect us from scary things. We need to have the courageous and honest attitude of the bodhisattva who is motivated by compassion to give her/his life to relieve the sufferings of others—very real sufferings. When we practice we need to place ourselves, over and over again, as close to the centre of the scale as we can. We need to strike a balance that is as far removed from both excitement and stupor as possible. We should do this calmly and with the assurance that we are leading ourselves into tranquility and insight.

Meditation is not all there is to life, although it is a very important part. A wholistic view of life will stress balance and moderation. The Buddha taught the "middle way." In the eightfold path morality and wisdom go hand-in-hand with meditation.

Meditation is the endeavour to discover our true selves, not the self that has been distorted by strong emotions and delusional thoughts. This process of discovery is the course of healing. "Healing" is such an all-encompassing concept. We all need healing.

In the context of this course I am hoping that the diagram of Striking a Balance can serve at least two important purposes:

1. To provide concepts to help us recognize problems when we encounter them in our practice.
2. To give us standards by which to evaluate our practice.

<http://www.jackrisk.ca/Contact.html>