

# Increasing Well-being Through Interdependence

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## Interdependence

Well-being is in vogue. Videos and books on the subject are best sellers and so-called influencers rake in millions of dollars presenting packages that supposedly lead us to mental peace and spiritual harmony.

Why is well-being so popular? How did we lose a state of mind that was natural for our ancestors?

Addiction expert Dr Gabor Mate points his finger directly at materialism.<sup>1</sup> He contends that the modern-day trend of placing material wealth above human values has been to the detriment of social connections, sense of caring, and spiritual beliefs. Basically, when material gain is taken as the optimum goal, competition is prioritised over co-operation and social connections falter. This is where we are today - part of a social system that is built almost entirely on individual rights and personal gain.

However, as this system counters the natural order of human existence, it is leading to a breakdown of communities, a weakening of family structures, ill health, mental illness, and the destruction of the planet.

As evidence of this, we only have to look at the United States. It is one of the planet's wealthiest and most materially developed nations, yet over 50% of the population will be diagnosed with a mental illness disorder at some point in their lives and nearly 60% of adults live with at least one chronic physical ailment.<sup>2</sup> In addition, drug abuse is endemic and gun crime is spiraling out of control.

So if a nation that is the epitome of our combined materialistic aspirations has so many issues, what does that say about a system based on individuality and materialism?

<sup>1</sup> Youtube: Dr Gabor Maté Leaves the Audience SPEECHLESS | One of the Best Speeches Ever

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.cdc.gov/mentalhealth/learn/index.htm>

What, then, is the natural order of human existence? Well, 2,500 years ago, the Buddha taught about emptiness, or interdependence as it is also called. Emptiness is not a void; it means that nothing exists as a truly existing object, but instead appears only when certain causes and conditions overlap?

Take a papaya tree for example. It does not suddenly appear out of nowhere, nor does it remain in a permanent, unchanging state. Instead, it grows from a seed that interacts with moisture from rain, warmth from sunlight, and nutrition from soil. And in time it will decay, becoming soil that nurtures other plants. Now a farmer will instinctively know that, to grow a papaya tree, it requires more than just a seed; that many other factors are also needed to produce a healthy tree with well-developed fruit. It is the same with society, especially the raising of children.

In fact, the decline of a sense of well-being worldwide can mostly be attributed to the individualistic, materialistic ideology that has influenced how we raise children and the environment in which they are brought up. In the same way that the seed of a papaya tree requires the timely introduction of factors to grow into a sturdy tree with healthy fruit, the psychoanalyst Erik Erikson has explained in his theory of development<sup>3</sup> that babies also need appropriate causes and conditions to develop into resilient and well-adjusted adults.

In this respect, it is not enough to merely give children food and clothing. They also require love, care, and to be accepted for who they are - whether they are pretty, handsome, ugly, smart, dumb, outgoing, shy, gay, or straight. Furthermore, the stress and uncertainty that modern-day parents are subjected to are absorbed by a small child's mind, which often manifests as an addiction as they mature - not necessarily to drugs, but perhaps to gambling, sex, alcohol, work, shopping, or video games.

Yet, despite the obvious failings of our modern world, people rarely question the system that they are plugged into as a source of unhappiness, anxiety, or discontentment, but instead turn to self-help books and videos, or they attend stress-relief meditation courses. However, the advice offered by well-being or meditation gurus is no more effective as a long-term solution for these issues than a band aid that is used to cover a festering wound or medication taken to prevent a full-blown cardiac arrest.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.simplypsychology.org/Erik-Erikson.html>

Now, the observations of Dr Mate and Erik Erikson reflect my personal experience of working with addicts. Before sending a drug abuser to Siliguri in India for rehabilitation, I would always compile a short bio-data. Very soon a pattern began to emerge, which was that nearly all the addicts were raised in an environment of extreme stress and trauma - either the parents had divorced and a step-parent was unkind or uncaring, or the parents had left them behind and moved overseas, or one or both parents were alcoholic.

How does this affect a child? Well, think of a simple scenario when a baby cries. Now, the normal bonding between parent and child would mean that the child is picked up and hugged. If this response is not forthcoming or, even worse, the child is screamed at or hit, he will feel traumatised, subconsciously believing that something is lacking in him, that he is unworthy of being loved. As he matures, this embedded sense of self-doubt will inevitably lead to a lack of self-confidence and an inability to trust others. Lost, alone, and often depressed, this person will seek solace and respite from his mental pain and is prone to step on the slippery path to drug abuse and addiction. In this respect, as Dr Gabor Mate asserts, drug abuse is merely a mechanism to cope with mental anguish.<sup>4</sup>

Of course, addiction creates greater issues for the individual, but we should understand that mental pain is no less debilitating than physical pain, perhaps worse in fact. In this respect, would a person who suffers chronic backache be able to resist the respite from pain that painkillers offer, even if he knows that they can lead to addiction? So, when drugs are prevalent in a society, we need to ask why people are turning to substances that will hurt them.

To make a bad situation worse, addiction is still often treated as a punishable offence and, despite evidence that incarcerating addicts is not only totally ineffective in stemming mass drug abuse but actually exacerbates the situation, it remains the preferred method in many countries (Taiwan and Portugal being notable exceptions).

Why does incarceration not work? Because it does not address the underlying causes or, to put it in another way, the judicial system does not examine why people turn to drugs, and so the roots of the problem remain deeply entrenched in the social structure.

<sup>4</sup> Youtube: The Best Explanation of Addiction I've Ever Heard – Dr. Gabor Maté

In addition, time in jail can turn an already damaged mind into one that is totally crippled and leave the addict with a sense of absolute hopelessness, which leads to relapse. In fact, statistics show that as many as 95% of addicts return to substance abuse after being released from jail.<sup>5</sup> In reality, the vast majority of addicts need help, not punishment.

To prove this point, consider the DNA of babies. In terms of addiction propensities, it is the same the world over. Yet, even among countries with similar drug laws, the number of addicts is not evenly spread.

What does this tell us? It shows us that the environment in which children are raised is a major influence on whether they turn to drugs or not. Specifically, we can note that, in places where individual rights and material gain is prioritised, such as the US and UK, drug abuse is endemic.

In contrast, in countries like Taiwan or Japan, where family and community responsibilities are favoured, drug abuse is low. Even a farmer will recognise that, when rice sown from the same sack flourishes in certain areas but fails in others, we need to examine the environment, not the rice. Yet most countries fail to recognise this simple fact and instead focus on the rice, and ignore the conditions where it is planted and raised. As a result, despite massive amounts of funds spent on border patrols and the incarceration of addicts, the number of cases continues to spiral upwards.

Furthermore, a system that places personal gain above social responsibility empowers industrialists to destroy forests and jungles and to burn fossil fuel. In turn, this causes zoonotic diseases to flourish and the planet to heat up.

Then, even before an increase in pandemics, famines, droughts, floods, and forest fires causes global chaos, these situations are already creating uncertainty in many parts of the world. This is raising stress levels, causing more children to be exposed to anxiety that will result in a rise in the number of addicts in the future.

What is the answer? It is not simple but it is clear that we need to replace the present GDP-led capitalist-based system with one that is rooted in the Buddha's wisdom of interdependence, and where human values of

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<sup>5</sup> <https://skywoodrecovery.com/why-imprisonment-is-more-harm-than-help-to-addicted-offenders/>

compassion, caring, equality, and respect for others are used as a guiding force for education.

Development should create wealth, but it needs to emulate the win-win relationship between bees and flowers, rather than one that desecrates the planet and destroys social and family bonding.

We also need a global initiative that encourages a widespread moratorium on treating drug abuse as a punishable offence while, at the same time, promotes the development of support-systems that help addicts address their underlying issues as a means to regain their well-being and dignity. This will not only benefit the individuals but societies as a whole.

In short, well-being can only emerge when we have systems that nurture the land and foster a sense of security and love for our children and for those who have fallen through the cracks of society. Anything else is merely cosmetic surgery applied to a dying person's face.