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[Scientists, Buddhists meet but don't quite reach nirvana](#)  
[Dalai Lama speaks at Stanford symposium as controversial appearance approaches](#)

- [Janine DeFao, Chronicle Staff Writer](#)

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Some 1,700 people held their breath Saturday in the presence of the Dalai Lama at Stanford University's Memorial Auditorium.

**Regular.  
Premium.**

It was not just their eager anticipation to hear the words of Tibet's exiled spiritual leader, Tenzin Gyatso. Instead, it was an audience-participation neuroscience experiment to demonstrate the nature of craving. Stop breathing, and you'll quickly crave respiration, neuroscientist Howard Fields aptly demonstrated.

The exercise was part of a daylong dialogue between red-robe-clad Buddhists and suit-and-tie scientists on how the brain works, with the lofty goal of joining both traditions' wisdom to alleviate human suffering.

But after two hours of discussing neuroscience and Buddhism's perspectives on craving and choice, even the eminent 14th Dalai Lama pronounced himself "so confused." It took the panelists that long to conclude that craving means entirely different things to those who study the brain and those who use it to reach a greater state of mindfulness.

Where the scientists and religious scholars did agree is that they have much to learn from each other.

"This is not about trying to apply scientific method to religion or faith or applying faith to science," said Dr. Philip Pizzo, dean of the School of Medicine, which sponsored the conference. "These are all part of the human experience. It's about boundaries and where they overlap and connect."

Despite an "extraordinary anti-science movement in the United States," exemplified by the rise of so-called intelligent design in the evolution debate, Pizzo called it a "tragic flaw" that some scientists have "raised questions about whether a symposium like this is appropriate."

That debate has been raging among neuroscientists since the Dalai Lama was invited to speak next week at the annual meeting of the Society for Neuroscience in Washington, D.C. More than 500 brain researchers signed a petition calling on the society to cancel the speech, expressing fears that mixing science and spirituality would compromise scientific objectivity.

At issue are several studies on the brain function of monks and others as they meditate, which Buddhists believe can increase compassion and a sense of peace. The Dalai Lama has a personal interest in the topic and has collaborated with a small group of researchers.

Advocates say the studies suggest that the brain can be trained to generate compassion, altruism and similar qualities. Critics say that the studies were flawed and that their findings have been overstated.

Without addressing those particular studies, the Stanford panel did discuss whether brain activity could be measured during Buddhist practices as they explored ways science and spirituality could inform each other.

"To help us identify which spiritual practices, specifically meditative practices, actually work, that would be tremendously beneficial," said Buddhist scholar Alan Wallace, president of the Santa Barbara Institute for Consciousness Studies.

The Dalai Lama himself, speaking at times in English and at others through an interpreter, said 2,500-year-old Buddhism can be "a bit backward" when compared with modern science.

"For Buddhists, it is extremely useful to learn from scientific findings, scientific exploration," said the 70-year-old Nobel Peace Prize winner, who spent much of the morning sitting in a high-backed chair with his feet tucked beneath him and empty shoes on the floor.

And there are questions science alone can't answer, said Fields, a professor at UC San Francisco.

Fields discussed the emerging possibility of using drugs to block cravings for addictions to alcohol, drugs and overeating.

"One of my questions is: Is this really a good approach?" he asked.

"If the craving springs right back when you stop taking the drug, then you have a craving for the drug, and you've gotten yourself into a loop," responded Wallace, who said Buddhists would advocate working to gain the wisdom to eliminate the craving.

But in neuroscience, craving is generally used to describe any desire, including beneficial ones, such as breathing. In Buddhism, craving typically describes wanting something deleterious that won't lead to true well-being. The two sides agreed they would need a common definition to move forward.

The Dalai Lama wanted to know if Fields' proposed anti-craving drug could eliminate all cravings -- not just for chocolate, say, but also for Brussels sprouts.

"Such a drug might produce a state of coma," Fields responded.

"That would be a disaster," the Dalai Lama said.

"The opposite of awakening," Fields quipped.

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