

Taking best from East, West

DALAI LAMA, NEUROSCIENTISTS EXPLORE HOW THE MIND WORKS

By Lisa M. Krieger
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The Dalai Lama has an idea for a scientific experiment: Identify which region of the brain experiences empathy. Is it the same place, he wonders, whether your empathy is for a loved one or a hostile enemy?

"Can we test what is going on here?" he asked a gathering of scientists and religious scholars at a conference held by Stanford University's School of Medicine on Saturday.

The answer, he said, could shed light on this most human emotion -- and offer insights that could inform both modern medicine and ancient Buddhism.

At a festive sold-out event, science and religion swapped ideas about emerging fields of research, seeking a common ground where both could thrive.

Open mind

"In this time when things are so polarized, when both sides can be so closed-minded and dogmatic, this has been a joy," said physics scholar and Buddhist monk Alan Wallace, who now runs the Santa Barbara Institute for Consciousness Studies.

But at Saturday's conference there was a sense of common respect, which opened up dialogue, he said.

"The conference is an effort to build a bridge between two very different traditions of studying the brain and the mind," said medical school Dean Philip Pizzo. "I think we're all seeking role models to help us understand complex topics."

Buddhists have a 2,500-year-old tradition of introspective inquiry into the nature of the mind. Stanford is home to the Neuroscience Institute, where scientists study the circuitry of the brain and how it responds to malfunction, injury, aging and disease.

Central human experiences -- such as craving, suffering and choice -- are rooted in both biology and faith, speakers agreed.

Neuroscience can reveal the neural networks and biochemical functions behind emotions like empathy, they said.

But science can't explain what triggers empathy or how to create it -- or what it feels like to experience another's pain.

The exiled leader of Tibet, named Tenzin Gyatso, was born into a family of simple farmers. They used cattle to plow their fields and trample their grain. He was not trained in science.

But since the age of 6, when he was enthroned as the 14th dalai lama, he has been fascinated by simple mechanical objects. He once said that he would have been an engineer were he not a monk.

He has embraced the scientific concepts of evolution, relativity and quantum mechanics. "I came to recognize that technology is the fruit of a particular way of understanding the world," he wrote in his new book "The Universe In a Single Atom."

He believes that there are striking similarities between science and Buddhist thought. Even the Buddha, he has written, exhorted his followers not to accept the validity of his teachings, but to test the truth of what he said through reasoned examination and personal experiment.

As Saturday's conference, the Dalai Lama sometimes scratched his head and pondered the implications of certain discoveries.

In turn, scientists challenged his belief that meditation could induce happiness and ease problems as profound as suicidal depression.

They agreed that hypnosis and biofeedback can help ease pain and that psychotherapy can help alter the negative thinking involved in depression.

But the mind cannot override a severe illness of the brain, said Dr. Helen Mayberg, professor of neurology and psychiatry at Emory University School of Medicine and an expert in the neuroimaging of mood disorders.

There was no reference to the turmoil behind the Dalai Lama's scheduled appearance at the upcoming annual conference of the Society for Neuroscience, to be held in Washington, D.C., later this month. Nearly 550 scientists to date have signed a petition urging the society to cancel his lecture. They say they'll boycott his lecture.