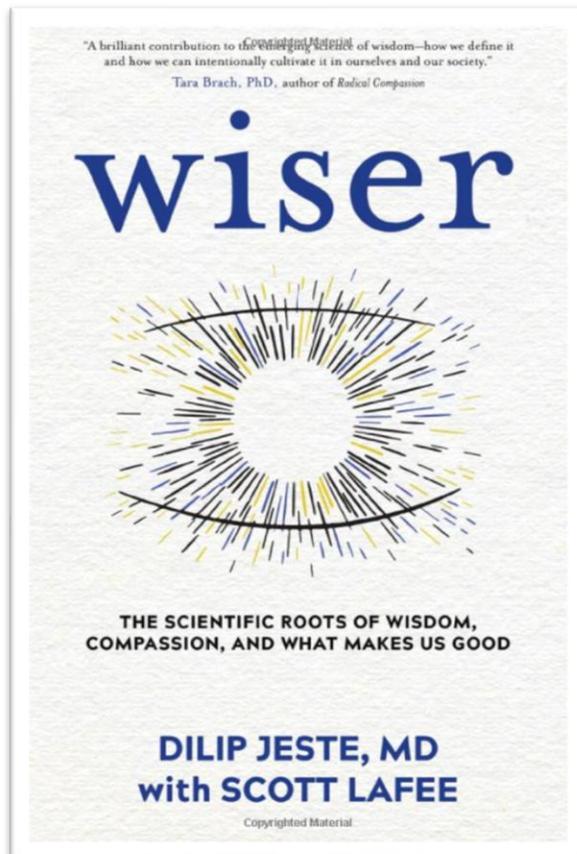


BOOK REVIEW



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WISER: THE SCIENTIFIC ROOTS OF WISDOM, COMPASSION, AND WHAT MAKES US GOOD

**Dilip Jeste, MD
& Scott Lafee**

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Over ten years ago Dr. Dilip Jeste – recognized as the founding father of Positive Psychiatry - published a scientific article comparing the conceptualization of wisdom in the ancient Indian text Bhagavad Gita to modern ideas about wisdom (Jeste and Vahia, 2008). In that initial incursion found several similarities including knowledge about life, emotional regulation, insight and compassion along with differences in the emphasis on control over desires and renunciation of materialistic pleasures. That comparative study was followed by a review on the neurobiology of wisdom in which the prefrontal cortex figures prominently as regulating limbic and striatal regions (Meeks and Jeste, 2009) . In the following year Dr. Jeste coordinated an expert consensus on the characteristics of wisdom that listed agreements on statements such as being a “personal quality”, “rare”, “experience driven”, “learned”, “a form of advanced emotional/cognitive development” and importantly as being measurable (Jeste et al., 2010). A few years later the work continued by proposing individual wisdom as a mechanism to explain the paradox of increased well-being despite worse physical health in old age (Jeste and Oswald, 2014). The measurement of wisdom was explored by Dr. Jeste in two further works, first by developing a shorter version of the 39-item Three-Dimensional Wisdom Scale (3D-WS) into the 12-item version 3D-WS-12 (Thomas et al., 2017); and second with the development of the San Diego Wisdom Scale (SD-WISE) (Thomas et al., 2019). All this outstanding body of work is now available to general audiences, and mental health practitioners, in the book “*Wiser: the scientific roots of wisdom, compassion, and what makes us good*” (Jeste and LaFee, 2020). The book is organized in three parts: “What is Wisdom?”, “Components of Wisdom”, and “Enhancing Practical and Societal Wisdom”.

In the first part of the book the authors recognize German psychologist Paul Bartes, and collaborators, as one of the first to develop a theory of human development with respect to wisdom in creating the Berlin Wisdom Project – a model that, according to the authors, placed great emphasis on knowledge and cognition. That work was followed by work in the US and Canada that lead to more insight into wisdom and

its many components. Eventually this body of work pointed to these many components as: prosocial attitudes and behaviors – like empathy and compassion; emotional regulation; decisiveness while recognizing the uncertainty of life; insight and self-reflection; and social-decision making based on pragmatic knowledge of life; with spirituality being added upon further consideration. This chapter on the definition of wisdom and its components is followed by a chapter on the neuroscience of wisdom, then the relationship between wisdom and age and finally a chapter on the its measurement. This final chapter on Part 1 is important as it includes the items of the San Diego Wisdom Scale – which may also be accessed at sdwise.ucsd.edu

Part 2 devotes a chapter to each proposed component of wisdom: compassion, emotional regulation, decisiveness in the face of uncertainty, self-reflection, and spirituality. All these chapters follow a similar structure: background, including historical, social, and scientific context; definitions; measures; and biology; followed by specific interventions designed to manipulate and boost each component. These chapters are information-dense while weaving stories and anecdotes that make the reading much easier and enjoyable.

The third part of the book is dedicated to practices to enhance practical and societal wisdom and includes two chapters: “becoming wiser faster”, “wisdom boosters: drugs, gadgets, and artificial wisdom?” and “The Future of Wisdom: moving from individual to societal wisdom.” These final chapters make clear the ambition of this project which in final measure points to making society wiser. Here the authors use the aging of societies to speculate about whether these extra years of life have contributed to wiser societies. The jury is still out on that question.

One potential limitation for the book is the authors focus on English language references and Western societies. Work remains to be done to apply these concepts of wisdom to the fullest extent of humanity today, including the large contingents living in China, Japan, and in many African nations, along with Latin America.

This short book builds on an enormous body of work and functions as a ticket to the dense world of functional neuroscience and the study of happiness. Overall, the reading experience is fluid, the book is well researched, and provides a large list of references for further study. There is likely nothing else to say but to affirm that one finishes the book wiser – and there is no better reason to recommend it without reservation.

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