

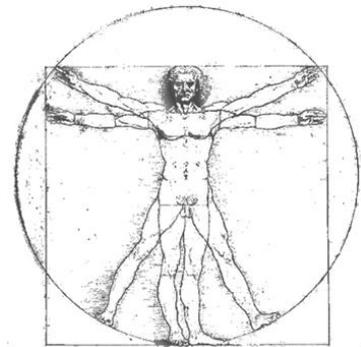
## Wellbeing – An Energetic Perspective

*'Learn how to see. Realize that everything connects to everything else.'*  
Leonardo da Vinci

*In this article, I explore wellbeing in the context of today's world and introduce what I call 'Qi Dynamics', the art of using energy for enhanced wellbeing – for individuals, teams and whole organisations. It was first published in Association for Coaching's Global Perspectives magazine, April 2017.*

How do we create wellbeing in the midst of a culture that does not truly support this? How do we manage our energy and leverage the best of our biology to thrive and flourish? These are questions that should preoccupy us as coaches.

The helping professions are far from immune to stress. A recent British Psychological Society survey of its own staff, *'revealed worrying apparent increases in staff stress since a similar survey in 2014, with 46 per cent of psychological professionals surveyed reporting depressed mood and 49 per cent reporting feeling they are a failure. 70 per cent of the 1348 people surveyed said they were finding their job stressful.'*



We all know that the issue is not a shortage of information, there is plenty out there. Unfortunately, we humans are generally not very good at following our own advice even when it serves our own wellbeing. Other criteria and behaviours, typically associated with comfort, energy saving habits and survival drives, take precedence.

While survival is a precondition for wellbeing, in order to meaningfully develop our wellbeing, individually and collectively we need to step out beyond our survival instincts. This is a challenge when the economic and social systems we have created do not support our desire to create a broader sense of wellbeing for ourselves and our families, especially while also supporting the wellbeing of wider human and natural systems.

Business as usual keeps us in a double bind. We become experts at fragmenting the world and are ourselves fragmented. Our systems and our thinking become siloed. The consequence is that wellbeing is applied as a remedy, an antidote for our ills, or a strategy for more profitability, rather than being a central connecting idea, an enabling lifestyle choice, a key criterion for success in work and life, in and of itself. Our work is to engage with the bigger picture and to connect the dots. This is an urgent issue for society and for coaching too.

## Five Steps to Wellbeing

The UK Government's 2006-2008 futures think-tank, Foresight, in its review of current knowledge on mental health and wellbeing, advocated taking five steps. The five steps are:

- Connect with others
- Be active
- Keep learning
- Give to others
- Be mindful

Good advice! However, it would be counter-productive to approach these with busy energy as just more scheduled things on our 'to do' lists.

## Connecting the Dots: Optimising Self-Organisation

The neuro-psychiatrist Daniel Siegel summarises his research into complexity theory with what he offers as a 'core truth': 'optimal self-organisation occurs when a system has two interactive processes - differentiating and linking.'

The capacity to differentiate and then link, i.e. integrate, within and between systems, are I believe fundamental processes for wellbeing and, co-incidentally, for coaching.

Moshe Feldenkrais, the founder of the Feldenkrais Method, an approach to movement and bodily re-education said, "*The aim [of the Feldenkrais Method] is a person that is organized to move with minimum effort and maximum efficiency, not through muscular strength, but through increased consciousness of how movement works.*" Essential to this, as I discovered through my Feldenkrais training, are the abilities, through attention and awareness, to differentiate aspects and functions of the body-mind and then integrate them.

Optimising self-organisation derives from mindfulness, sensitivity and the willingness to acknowledge 'what is' before engaging in the open flowing exchange of energy and information towards the realisation of potential.

Differentiation is not the same as division and integration is not merging – both of which would create a certain rigidity. Do we respect difference (differentiation) or do we feel threat and build walls, internal or external, thereby impacting movement and energy flow? How well do we bring elements together, inside or out, in creative emergent conversation, to become greater than the sum of the parts?

## Qi Dynamics

Wellbeing seems to be defined in a variety of ways but to my mind at heart it is an all-embracing concept and attitude. Wellbeing is as much about the process by which we do something as it is about what we do. It is both a result of a life well lived and an enabler of a life well lived.

As such it is about what I call Qi Dynamics: the qualities of how we generate, distribute and utilise energy in a system, whether that be an individual, team or organisation. Qi (pronounced key) is the Japanese word for energy, and is applied in martial arts and other self-cultivation traditions of the East.

Both the Buddha and Aristotle (both from the 4<sup>th</sup> Century BC, Nepal and Greece respectively) taught the middle way. Aristotle defined virtue as the middle path between extremes. Both recommended the act of self cultivation, which within the Eastern perspective is a patient and loving nurturing with focused and dedicated practice, we can think of it like being a good gardener of one's soul. This is wellbeing: not a result or endpoint, but an active ongoing tendering of Qi and one's life.

Wellbeing has a certain ease, a certain lightness and quality of flow even as we strive. Bring to mind the relaxed focussed effort of an athlete performing at their best. Finding calm and high performance in the eye of the storm. This is a story of creating the conditions for success and getting the job done in a healthy sustainable way, not through draining resources and burning out. This applies equally to individual and society.

It takes training and practice to find ease within a life full of demands, and we should approach it as something we are practicing – not doing perfectly, but practicing. Enabling wellbeing and flow involves a willingness to pay attention, to be mindful in an open and honest way to our energy flow and how things are. It involves positive active participation and a certain courage, otherwise we are in stasis, stuck with no impetus to learn and grow, a recipe for decline in both individuals and organisations.

Often energy, within which I include information, does not flow freely or smoothly within a system or between systems. There can be many reasons for these blockages or distortions, connected perhaps to a fear, lack of awareness, poor practice or limited imagination. Defences range from denial to over-inflated optimism. Our organisations look for efficiency and effectiveness but so much energy is lost in survival strategies; in withholding, tension, turning away, disruption.

What must be true for a system to come out from behind its defences? How do we shape ourselves for wellbeing? Energetically the mind, emotions, body and spirit all have a part to play. In martial arts terms, it is the capacity to stay centred and open amongst the moving forces of life, establishing a mind that is clear, a heart open to compassion, and a gut that holds our confidence. We also need a vision, an embodying meditation on wellbeing that primes our system.

Our guiding beliefs, presuppositions and attitudes are important here and so is the body. Our posture can literally shape our future. Likewise, our breath is a gateway between the conscious and unconscious and can both reveal our energetic state to us and influence that state.

A useful practice connecting breath and posture is as follows: gently breathe in with a sense of uplift lengthening the spine, followed by an out breath of twice the length with a gentle smile and a feeling of softening and openness down the front of your body. The lengthening connects us to our integrity and the softening out breath opens us to connection and compassion, it is a practice that can help us towards a centred state of wellbeing.

## Wellbeing and Paradox

Wellbeing, and we could say life, involves living with paradox, like saying 'yes' to what is, while also seeking to change what is. Our capacity for wellbeing develops with our capacity to hold our shadow alongside our light, our fears along with our love: to be present to the full spectrum. To be open for example to what the psychotherapist and author David Richo calls '*The Five Things We Cannot Change*':

- Life is not fair
- Pain is part of life
- People are not loving and loyal all the time
- Life does not always go according to (your) plans
- Change is part of life.

To rail against these with aggression or retreat is to take us away from our potential. And as the poet David Whyte says, "the only choice we have is how to inhabit our vulnerability". Wellbeing does not mean everything is perfect, that all our ducks are perfectly lined up. It is the capacity to say yes to life as it is and have the resources to meet and greet what comes with integrity, to be grateful and generous, interested and curious, open and engaged.

## Summary

We instinctively know that we are part of an interconnected system but our way of life does not reflect this despite this truth being so clearly presented to us today from so many directions: economically, socially, environmentally, politically and in all the issues we face in health, social justice etc. As Paul Ray and Sherry Anderson have pointed out 'we have no guiding story that places us in a context of relationship to our planet' (*The Cultural Creatives*). What are the stories our clients are guided by, what are the stories we are guided by? Can we help shift those stories towards greater systemic wellbeing?

This is the energetic territory for coaches.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Paul King is co-founder with Marie Faire of The Beyond Partnership. Paul has been a coach, consultant and trainer for more than 25 years with a passion for integral, holistic and somatic approaches, and has worked in Europe, North America and Asia. His early career was with Deloitte and PWC. He trained initially with Sir John Whitmore and Alan Fine in Inner Game coaching. He has studied with numerous somatic teachers, is a NLP Trainer, a Tai Chi teacher and is qualified in Feldenkrais (Movement Re-Education) and Polarity Therapy. He offers various body-mind, wellbeing, performance and leadership workshops. Paul can be contacted at [paul@thebeyondpartnership.co.uk](mailto:paul@thebeyondpartnership.co.uk). For services and workshops please visit [www.thebeyondpartnership.co.uk](http://www.thebeyondpartnership.co.uk)

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