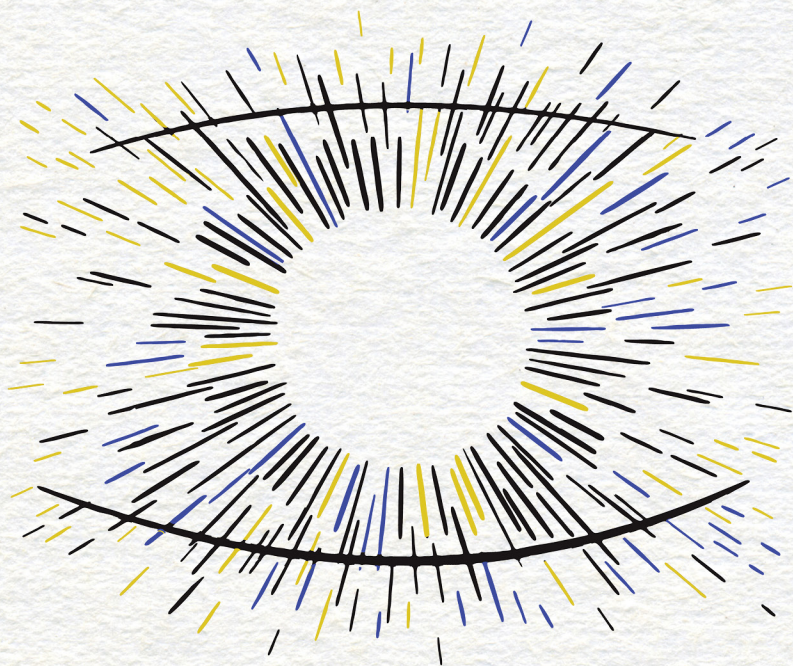


“A brilliant contribution to the emerging science of wisdom—how we define it and how we can intentionally cultivate it in ourselves and our society.”

Tara Brach, PhD, author of *Radical Compassion*

wiser



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

**DILIP JESTE, MD
with SCOTT LAFEE**

Sounds True
Boulder, CO 80306

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Praise for *Wiser*

“*Wiser* is a brilliant contribution to the emerging science of wisdom—how we define it, research it, and how we can intentionally cultivate it in ourselves and our society. A timely and hope-giving book as our world faces challenges that require the deepening of our wisdom as a species.”

TARA BRACH

author of *Radical Compassion*

“The new science of wisdom is transforming the way we understand human potential and showing that the ancients were right: wisdom is real, wisdom is precious, and we can all be, yes, wiser. Drawing on cutting-edge neuroscience and a lifetime of research, Dilip Jeste brings the attributes of wisdom—compassion, self-reflection, humor, curiosity, and spirituality—to every page. He shows that wisdom can be developed and strengthened, and he explains how. A lot of books have made me smarter. This one made me better.”

JONATHAN RAUCH

author of *The Happiness Curve*, senior fellow of Brookings Institution, and recipient of National Magazine Award

“*Wiser* is the readable summation and thoughtful culmination of the thought and work by Dr. Jeste on wisdom over many years. No medical scientist, to my knowledge, has been willing to tackle the expansive complexities of practical wisdom, what some may label as ‘wisdom that matters,’ as thoroughly as the author. Jeste takes us on a journey through the neurobiological foundations as well as the psychological and social components of practical wisdom. He artfully integrates the unique perspectives of his cultural background and a stellar career of scientific inquiry using Western methodologies. He has collaborated with and supported conversations among many scholars and has distilled these conversations into a basic handbook that will be of immense value to all who read the material, more importantly to those who are willing to grapple with this ever-expanding horizon of inquiry. That horizon is informed by science, the humanities, and wisdom itself.”

DAN BLAZER, MD, PHD

author of *The Age of Melancholy* and *Freud vs. God*,
JP Gibbons professor emeritus of psychiatry and
behavioral sciences, Duke University School of Medicine

“Much has been written about human tendencies to compete, with winner-take-all rewards. Yet none of us would survive alone. The true story about humankind involves cooperation, kindness, and compassion. This lesson appears to grow stronger with age. Dilip Jeste, with Scott LaFee, details the science behind the proclivities to be concerned for the welfare of others and the circumstances that enrich it. Read this definitive account of wisdom and be wiser for it.”

LAURA L. CARSTENSEN, PHD

author of *A Long Bright Future: An Action Plan for a Lifetime of Happiness, Health, and Financial Security*;
founding director, Stanford Center on Longevity;
Fairleigh S. Dickinson Jr. professor in public policy
and professor of psychology, Stanford University

“In *Wiser*, Jeste, with LaFee, has written a compelling new book about the scientific research that takes the notions of wisdom and morally grounded reasoning out of the realms of myth and philosophy and into the bright light of modern psychology and neuroscience. From defining wisdom as an aspect of human mind and brain to explaining its psychological components and how to become wiser, Jeste, with LaFee, has produced an important and exciting new book on the science of wisdom. This is a deeply engaging book that explains clearly the science of wisdom and provides practical suggestions for wiser reasoning grounded in solid research.”

HOWARD C. NUSBAUM, PHD

founding director, Center for Practical
Wisdom, and Stella M. Rowley professor
of psychology, University of Chicago

“We have never needed this book more than we need it now. It is the right book, at the right time, and for all the right reasons. Professor Dilip Jeste, with Scott LaFee, traces the scientific and sociocultural roots of wisdom, its cultivation, and its deep links to compassion and to lives well led. Not only medical and social scientists but also health and social policy makers and general readers will find insight and comfort in this volume. We need wisdom and courage for the facing of this hour. *Wiser* helps immensely.”

CHARLES F. REYNOLDS III, MD

distinguished professor of psychiatry emeritus,
University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine; recipient
of Pardes Humanitarian Prize in Mental Health

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WAKING UP THE WORLD

Introduction

Seeking Wisdom of the Ages at All Ages

Wisdom is not intelligence.

It is more, much more.

TO BE SURE, we all want to be smart. We all know people who are intelligent, to whom the workings of the world come a bit more readily and easily. Smart people seem to understand complexities. They make connections, see patterns, and find solutions with efficiency and apparent ease. They are the classmates who got straight A's, the coworkers with the brilliant plan or best way to make the bottom line. They see the “next big thing” before others are even looking.

But many smart people are not happy. They appear perpetually stressed and under pressure. They may appear to care only about themselves, making you reluctant to seek their advice because you don't know whose priorities are first. You can't always predict how they will react to your request. They may smile and say, “Of course.” They may become angry. They may be indifferent.

It's good (and often profitable) to be smart, but being wise is more interesting and more useful if our goal is to live a full and meaningful life. I'm not referring simply to the pursuit of happiness, which is distinctly subjective and frequently shifting. What makes you "happy" one moment or at one point in your life may not in another moment or as you age. Our notions of happiness change over time. And they are often different from others'.

Of course, happiness is a good goal. It typically accompanies becoming wiser, but wisdom is more about acquiring a deeper understanding about meaning in life, of being able to see how and where you fit into the grander scheme of things and how you can be a better person for yourself and for others. Searching for and finding meaning and purpose in life is not limited to philosophers. It is associated with better health, wellness, and perhaps longevity and definitely with wisdom. People who have a clear-eyed sense of the rational meaning in life—whatever that may be—are happier and healthier than those without it. They are also wiser.

We all know wise people. They're smart. Intelligence is an integral part of wisdom. But they are also warmhearted and compassionate. They are sophisticated, not simply or only in terms of academics or business, but in the ways of the world and of people. They are open-minded. They listen and make others feel heard. They are reflective, unselfish, and problem focused. They are willing to act on their beliefs and convictions, to do what is right, first or alone. Wise people become trusted advisers because they possess characteristic sagacity, happiness, and a calm demeanor we can rely on. They seem to instinctively know how to handle the personal problems that others find overwhelming. Wise people stand still and resolute amid chaos and uncertainty. They are different. And the rest of us would like to be more like them.

Many of the wise people you know are probably old, or at least older. Wisdom and advanced age seem synonymous. Consider the

great works of legend and literature: Moses, Helen Keller and Toni Morrison, Gandalf, Albus Dumbledore and Yoda (who undoubtedly picked up a few things over his 900-year life).

“Older and wiser.”

“Older but wiser.”

So go the adages. We all expect wisdom to bring the fruits of contentedness, happiness, and calm, with a corresponding decline in stress, anger, and despair. But as you will see, wisdom and age are not inextricably bound.

Personality certainly plays a role. Psychologists define personality as a set of characteristic and consistent patterns of thinking, feeling, and behaving that distinguish each of us from everyone else, such as individual variances in sociability or irritability. Why are you shy and introverted while your sibling is a life-of-the-party extrovert? Why do coworkers panic over missed deadlines while you do not? Why is your boss is always angry?

Wisdom is a personality trait. The complex components that comprise and characterize it are part of the even larger and more complex set of elements that describe and define your personality.

Becoming wiser is a personality plus. But why are some people wiser, more perceptive, and more content in their lives than others? Do we have to become old to become wise as well? Can people become wiser faster? These are questions I have pursued over a long and revelatory career.

As a teenager growing up in India, I became fascinated by Sigmund Freud’s books for laypeople on interpreting dreams and everyday errors in life. Freud was a neuropsychiatrist. He believed that all behaviors had a biological basis in the brain. He asserted that psychology rode on the back of physiology. Though I didn’t know if Freud’s interpretations of dreams and slips of tongue were accurate,

I was taken by his strong sense that the ultimate answer lay within the physical brain.

So I decided to learn more about this mysterious organ and its primary product, the mind. I went to medical school to become a psychiatrist, which was a rather odd choice in India at that time.

When I completed medical school in Poona (now called Pune), India, at age 21, the total number of trained psychiatrists in all of India—a nation of more than 550 million people at the time—was probably fewer than one hundred. Although my family and close friends did not try to deter me, I am sure they were perplexed by my choice. Perhaps some secretly suspected my sanity.

My interest in psychiatry focused on studying the brain itself. My medical school in Poona did not have a research program in psychiatry, so I moved to Bombay (now Mumbai) and did my residency under the mentorship of two pioneers of academic psychiatry in India: N. S. Vahia and D. R. Doongaji. I learned how to properly conduct simpler types of clinical research; I published several papers. But soon I bumped up against the limits of brain research in India at the time. There simply weren't enough facilities, physicians, or resources to do the kind of work I wanted to do—and so I headed for the mecca of medical research, the United States and the National Institutes of Health (NIH). After completing another psychiatry residency that was required for a license in the US (at Cornell University), I would spend several years at the NIH working on a host of psychiatric issues and questions. In 1986, I moved again, joining the faculty of the University of California San Diego School of Medicine, then and now a place of invigorating, collaborative research. It is still my academic home.

My early work at UC San Diego focused on the nature and biology of schizophrenia, especially in older people. Throughout this period, I never quite got away from my youthful fascination about the fundamental workings of the brain and its connection to wisdom.

But for a long time, I wasn't comfortable pursuing such research as a scientist. When I finally broached the idea of formally studying wisdom a dozen years ago, others, including colleagues and close friends, reacted with varying combinations of amusement, dismissal, sympathy, and maybe sometimes pity and dismay.

They told me that wisdom was a religious and philosophical concept, not a scientific one. I was counseled to not speak about research on wisdom if I wanted to avoid whispered ridicule or to successfully garner project funding. If I had been a young researcher at the time, I likely would have been persuaded to retreat in the face of overwhelmingly negative conventional wisdom. But being older and already having an established academic career, I was willing and prepared to take up the challenge.

Most of my academic and professional life has been spent seeking to understand the human mind and its condition, principally in terms of cognition and brain function across the adult life span and especially in older age. During the last two decades I, as a geriatric neuropsychiatrist, have focused primarily on the idea of "aging successfully," and what that means in terms of happiness and satisfaction, which surely rate high among most people's goals.

We tend to think of aging, particularly after middle age, as a period of progressive decline in physical, cognitive, and psychosocial functioning. For many, the graying of America represents its number one public health problem—looming, unavoidable, and alarming.

Yet there are many older people who thrive in later life. We all know of artists, writers, judges, and politicians who are active, productive, creative, engaged, and contributing members of society in important ways. At age 61 and weighing just 99 pounds, for example, Gandhi led a 200-mile, three-week march to protest the British salt tax, a major step toward India's national independence. Benjamin Franklin was 70 when he signed the Declaration of Independence.

Nelson Mandela became president of South Africa at age 76—and married Graca Machel four years later. Shigeaki Hinohara, a Japanese physician who lived to the age of 106, published multiple books after his 75th birthday. Anna Mary Robertson Moses, better known as Grandma Moses, took up painting at 76 and produced more than a thousand images before she died a quarter of a century later. Her works now sell for tens of thousands of dollars.

Older people are often happier than people half their age. In a study conducted in 2016, my colleagues and I found that the mental health of adults improved with age, even as their physical health declined. They enjoyed higher levels of life satisfaction, happiness, and well-being and lower levels of anxiety, depression, and subjective stress than those decades younger.

I believe—and it's the basis of this book—that wisdom, like consciousness or stress or resilience, is fundamentally grounded in biology. And like all other biological functions, wisdom too can be studied, measured, altered, and enhanced using modern, empirical methods of science and medicine. Saying so does not negate the role or importance of psychosocial factors in the development of wisdom. From the presence of loving parents and grandparents to attending safe schools to having a supporting network of family and friends, the world we experience shapes who we are and how we live with others within it.

Behavior and environment impact biology—and biology impacts behavior. That's a good thing. It means that each of us can increase our biologically based wisdom through various means, including behavioral, environmental, biological, and technological interventions. We can, in effect, become wiser faster.

This is a big, bold idea. It turns traditional understanding about wisdom on its head. For most of us, and for most of human history, wisdom has been considered sublime and indescribable, an accumulation of lessons learned over a lifetime. People seek wisdom, but finding it takes time, frequently accompanied by

blood, sweat, and tears. Wisdom was considered the ethereal fruit and reward of aging.

But with ever-accelerating advances in science, with our growing ability to literally watch our minds at work and identify the mental mechanisms involved—down to the patterns of electrical and chemical messages between neurons that form memories—we are increasingly able to deliberately and positively alter our minds and behaviors in a relatively short period. Indeed, scientists are already able to create—and then erase—memories in laboratory animals. If we can alter the very fabric of our minds, why can't we weave in new threads of wisdom as well?

I believe we can. As we progressively understand the biology of the human brain—how all its diverse parts work together to produce the human mind—we will be able to expand, minimize, repair, improve, and just generally modify its results.

Wiser is an unprecedented guide designed and intended to help you identify, understand, nurture, and promote the behaviors of wisdom that already exist within you, the biologically based traits that the new science of wisdom posits can increasingly be measured, modified, expanded, and enhanced.

The scientific term for the only surviving human species is *Homo sapiens*, Latin for “wise man.” Humans need to be wise. Wisdom has evolutionary significance, which we will explore later in the book.

Despite occasional moments of serendipity, science is usually laborious and plodding. That's a strength. It helps assure that the eventual finding or conclusion will more likely be right than wrong due to painstaking effort. Wisdom is similar. No one goes to sleep a fool and wakes up wise. Becoming wiser is a process. This book, based on the relatively youthful science of wisdom, is about how readers might speed up that process.

Perhaps in reading this introduction, you remain skeptical. That's entirely understandable and the sign of a scientific mind.

INTRODUCTION

For so long, wisdom has seemed ephemeral, something cool to think about—but only to think about. Many people, scholars and scientists among them, are skeptical. I meet them regularly and routinely. They express surprise at this topic. They have doubts and questions. To them and to you, this book represents my answers and evidence. It is not the end of the discussion, but the beginning.

We need the powers and benefits of wisdom now more than ever. The need is particularly acute in times of trouble, fear, and woe, in times of war and global pandemic. In such moments, we need wisdom both in ourselves and in our leaders, because it is our collective wisdom that will lead to the betterment of humanity.

In this book, you and I will take a journey together, one that I hope will offer ample persuasive proof, but more importantly, reveal new ideas, insights, encouragement, and hope that wisdom is not a vague aspiration but something we can grasp, modify, and enhance, that the emerging neuroscience of wisdom and the understanding of how wisdom can be consciously improved promises to change ourselves and our world. I believe it can be for the better. For each of us. For all of us.



Part I

What Is Wisdom?

Here's the first rule of improvement, whether the matter at hand is installing a new sink, rebuilding a car engine, or becoming wiser: you need to know what you're working with, how it (the plumbing, car engine, or in this case, your brain) works, and how to know that what you've done is actually an improvement on the original.

Part I addresses these requirements and lays the groundwork for the chapters that follow. I recount the enduring constancy of the concept of wisdom, which surprisingly hasn't changed much in meaning over millennia, the neuroscience of wisdom (where in the brain its traits reside), and the emerging tools of science that have moved investigation and discussion beyond the salons of philosophy and into the lab.

I also discuss the intimate but not inevitable linkage of age with wisdom. Wisdom often comes with age but, to paraphrase Oscar Wilde, sometimes age comes alone. Likewise, wisdom is sometimes apparent in youth, although even in those lucky people it should increase with age and experience.

And I introduce a new, peer-reviewed measure of wisdom called the Jeste-Thomas Wisdom Index, which you can take online. It is the first measurement developed and based on the neurobiology of wisdom.

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