

## **Contemplative Religious Practice and Medicine's Missing Dimension**

Kenneth H. Wilson, M.D.  
Professor of Medicine  
Infectious Diseases Section  
VA Medical Center/Duke University  
508 Fulton St.  
Durham, NC 27705  
[kenneth.wilson@duke.edu](mailto:kenneth.wilson@duke.edu)  
Phone: (919) 286-0411 ext 7308  
Fax: (919) 286-6895

In this presentation a physician-scientist who practices Zen will discuss how the world's wisdom traditions including Buddhism and contemplative Christianity can enrich the practice of medicine. Science-based medicine has led to an effective but materialistic practice that often feels less than complete. Ultimately based in concepts of matter and energy, science does not address our undeniable conscious experience of this life, to which we are all witness – our sensations, emotions, thoughts, understandings, sense of self. Nor does it say anything about our place in the cosmos. Yet for probably most of the 100,000 years of human existence such concerns were at the core of the healing arts. Something relatively intangible has been lost that many patients and practitioners instinctively miss. Pre-modern healing traditions embraced the reality that sickness, patient and healer lie infinitely beyond fabrications of the discursive mind, to which science is limited. Although conceptual fabrications have proven useful in controlling disease, we still sense this reality. By practicing a contemplative religious tradition, a healer can explore the limiting nature of both conceptual knowledge and the fabricated self, and eventually meet the patient in a more spacious context. Yet the way is compatible with science and most cultural milieus. It takes time, effort and sometimes courage to extend past these limits and most of us will probably never go beyond all of them, but one inspired to make this effort can recapture the ancient essence of being a healer.