

Being and Doing: Activating Neural Networks Of Mindful Presence

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Topics

- **Neural factors of mindfulness**
- **Dual modes**
- **Egocentric and allocentric**
- **Taking life less personally**



Neural Factors of Mindfulness

Basics of Meditation

- Relax; posture that is comfortable and alert
- Simple good will toward yourself
- Awareness of your body
- Focus on something to steady your attention
- Accepting whatever passes through awareness
- Gently settling into peaceful well-being

Seven Factors of Mindfulness

- **Setting an intention** - “top-down” frontal, “bottom-up” limbic
- **Relaxing the body** - parasympathetic nervous system
- **Feeling cared about** - social engagement system
- **Feeling safer** - inhibits amygdala/ hippocampus alarms
- **Encouraging positive emotion** - dopamine, norepinephrine
- **Panoramic view** - lateral networks
- **Absorbing the benefits** - positive implicit memories

*Concentration is
the proximate cause of wisdom.*

*Without concentration, one cannot even secure
one's own welfare, much less the lofty goal of
providing for the welfare of others.*

Acariya Dhammapala

Penetrative insight

joined with calm abiding

utterly eradicates

afflicted states.

Shantideva



Dual Modes

Dual Modes

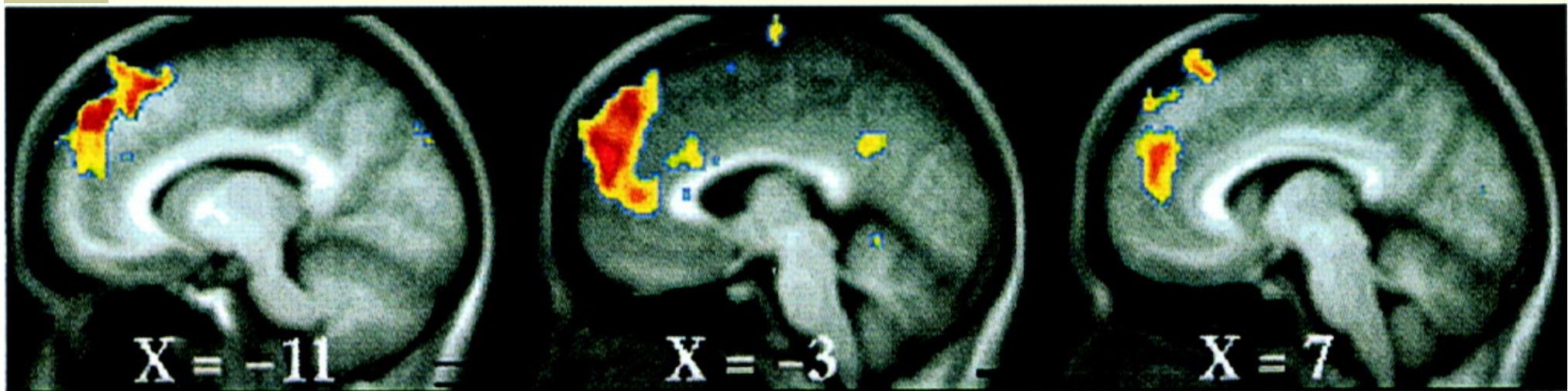
“Doing”

Mainly representational
Much verbal activity
Abstract
Future- or past-focused
Goal-directed
Sense of craving
Personal, self-oriented perspective
Focal view
Firm beliefs
Evaluative
Lost in thought, mind wandering
Reverberation and recursion
Tightly connected experiences
Prominent self-as-object
Prominent self-as-subject

“Being”

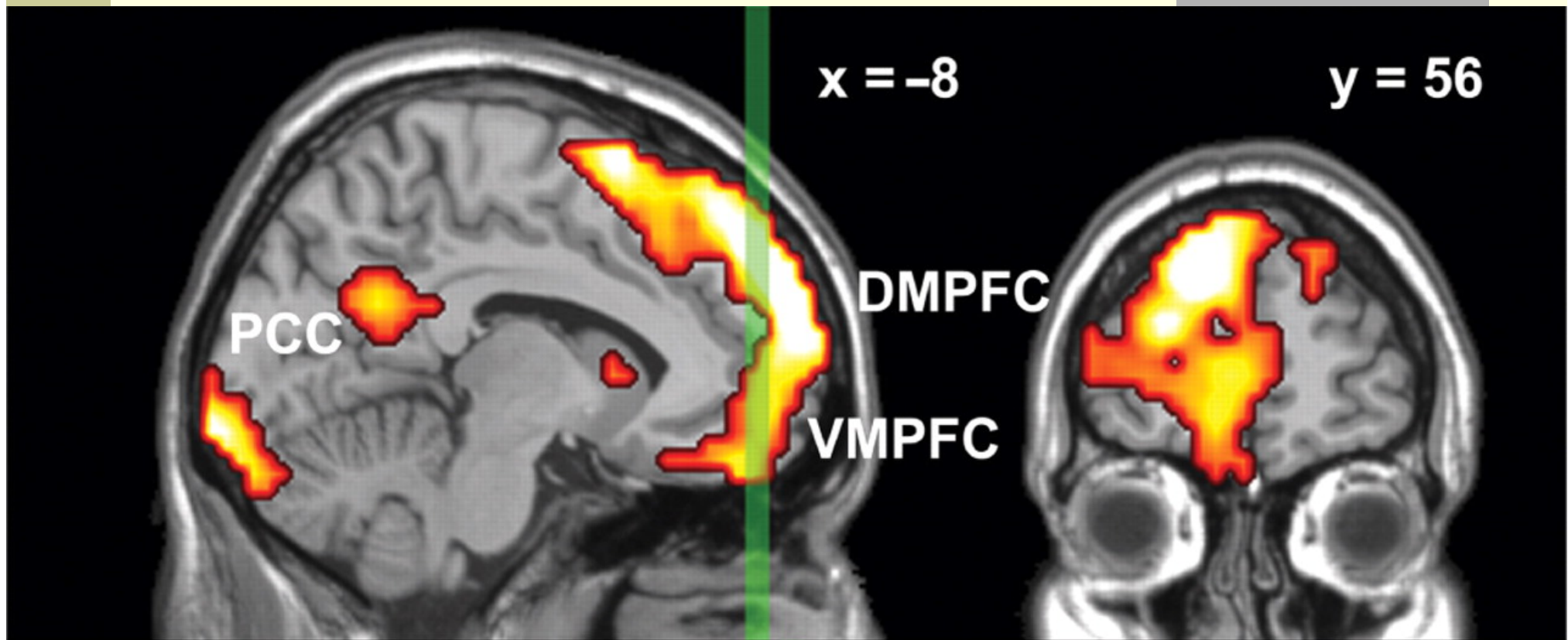
Mainly sensory
Little verbal activity
Concrete
Now-focused
Nothing to do, nowhere to go
Sense of peace
Impersonal, 3rd person perspective
Panoramic view
Uncertainty, not-knowing
Nonjudgmental
Mindful presence
Immediate and transient
Loosely connected experiences
Minimal or no self-as-object
Minimal or no self-as-subject

Increased Medial PFC Activation Related to Self-Referencing Thought



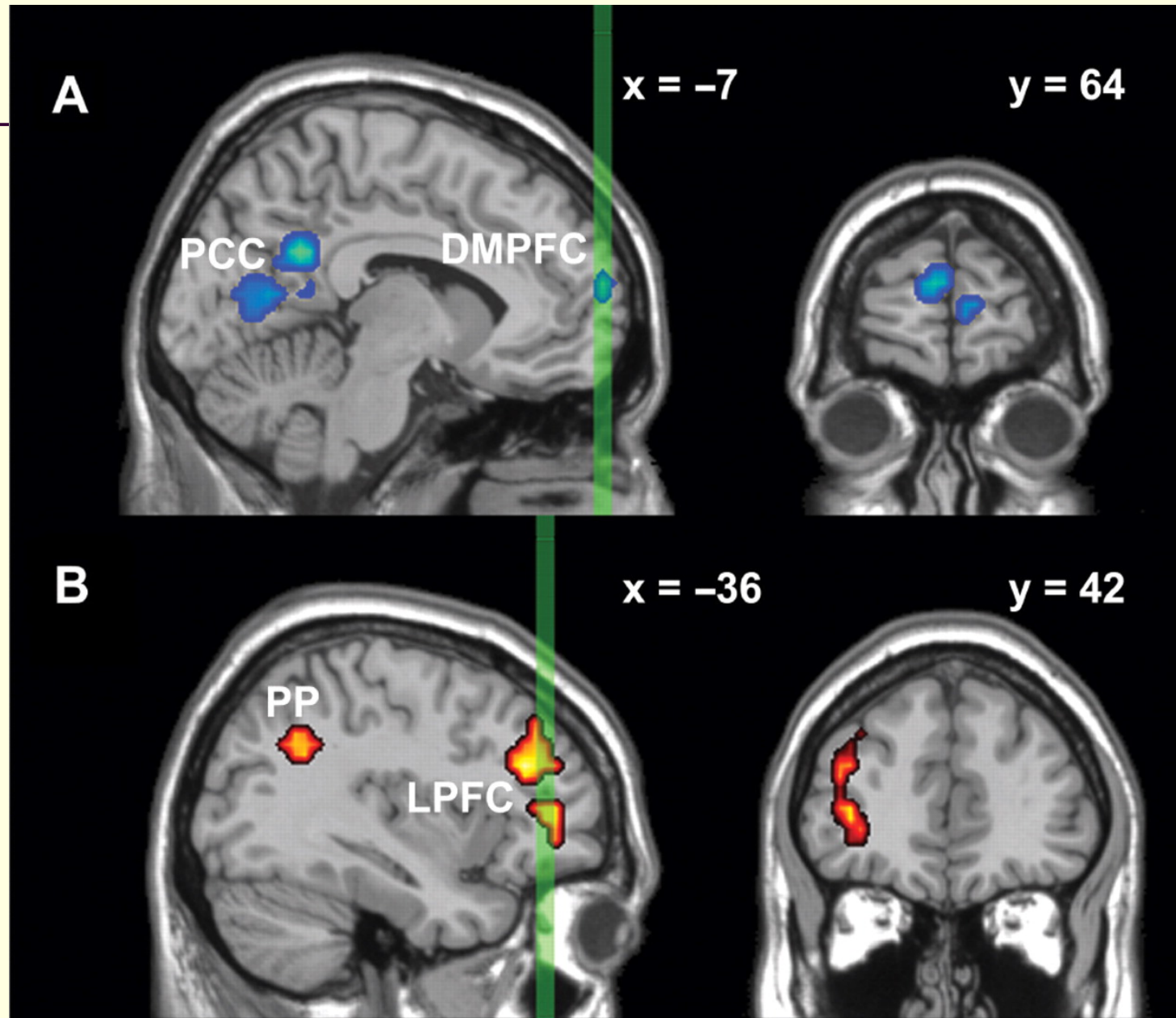
Gusnard D. A., et.al. 2001. *PNAS*, 98:4259-4264

Cortical Midline Areas for Self-Referencing Thought

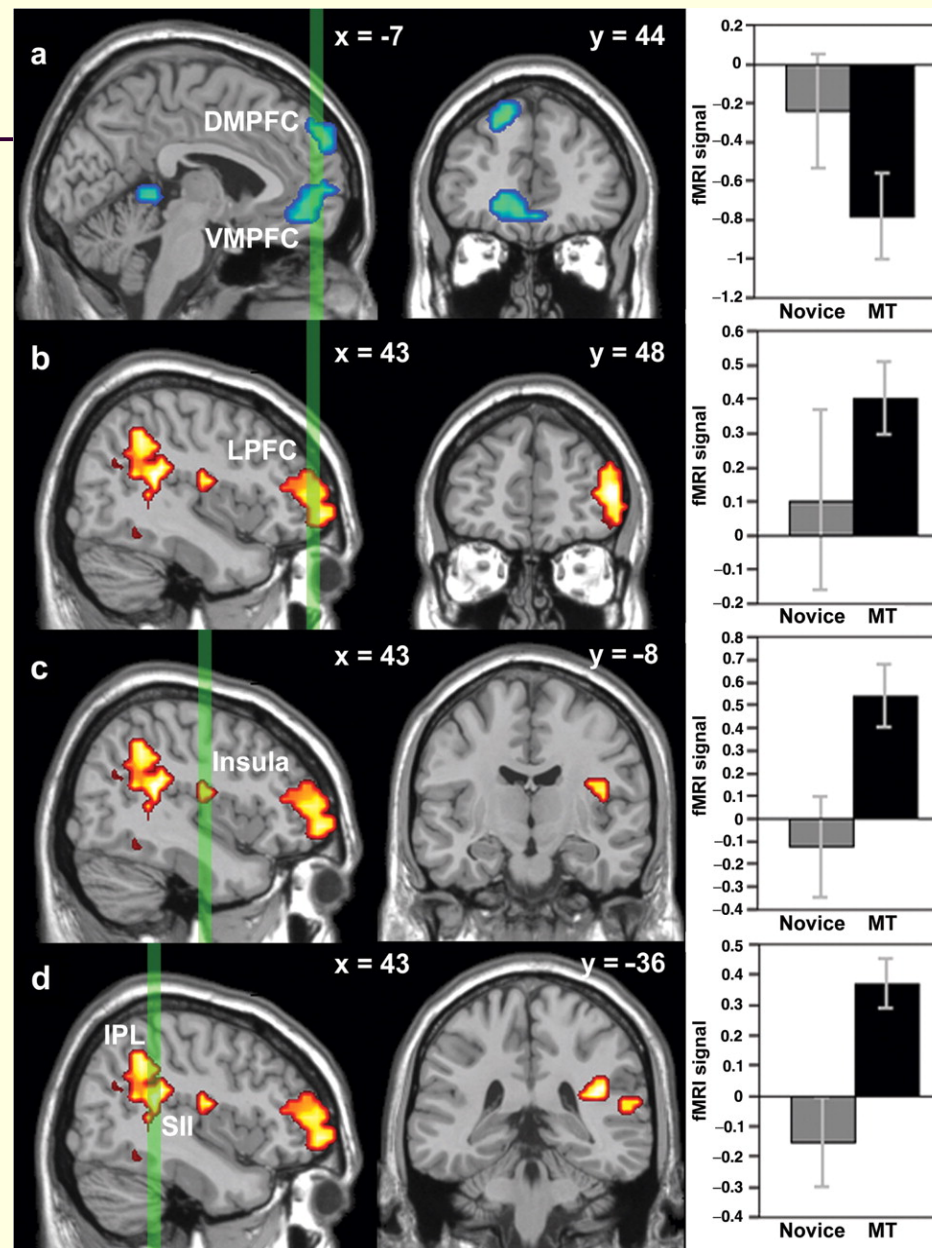


Farb, et al. 2007. *Social Cognitive Affective Neuroscience*, 2:313-322

Self-Focused (blue) and Open Awareness (red) Conditions (in the novice, pre MT group)



Self-Focused (blue) vs Open Awareness (red) Conditions (following 8 weeks of MT)



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Ways to Activate “Being” Mode

- Relax
- Focus on bare sensations and perceptions
- Sense the body as a whole
- Take a panoramic, “bird’s-eye” view
- Engage “don’t-know mind”; release judgments
- Don’t try to connect mental contents together
- Let experience flow, staying here now
- Relax the sense of “I, me, and mine”

How to Take in the Good (TG)

1. Have a good experience.
 - You are already having one.
 - You deliberately recognize a good fact and let it become a good experience.
2. Extend the good experience in:
 - Time - for 10-20-30+ seconds
 - Space - in your body and feelings
 - Intensity - help it become stronger
3. Absorb the good experience by intending and sensing that is becoming a part of you, woven into the fabric of your brain and being.

Whole Body Awareness

- Sense the breath in one area (e.g., chest, upper lip)
- Sense the breath as a whole: one gestalt, percept
- Sense the body as a whole, a whole body breathing
- Sense experience as a whole: sensations, sounds, thoughts . . . all arising together as one unified thing
- It's natural for this sense of the whole to be present for a second or two, then crumble; just open up to it again and again.

Panoramic Awareness

- Recall a bird's-eye view (e.g., mountain, airplane)
- Be aware of sounds coming and going in an open space of awareness, without any edges: boundless
- Open to other contents of mind, coming and going like clouds moving across the sky.
- Pleasant or unpleasant, no matter: just more clouds
- No cloud ever harms or taints the sky.



Egocentric and Allocentric

Egocentric Perspective

- Based on upper processing streams in the brain: upper portions of the thalamus that confer “self” salience; rear regions of the “default network” (e.g., precuneus, posterior cingulate cortex); parietal regions that construct an enduring and unified sense of “my body in space”
- Establishes “where it is in relation to me”; lower visual field
- Develops earliest in childhood
- “Subjective” - Things exist in relation to me.
- Action-oriented - Focus on reacting to carrots and sticks

Allocentric Perspective

- Based on lower processing streams in the brain that involve: lower regions of the thalamus that confer “world” salience;
- Establishes “what it is independent of me”; upper visual field
- Begins developing around age four
- “Objective” - Things exist in a physical space in which their location is impersonal, not in reference to the viewpoint of an observer.
- This perspective pervades *kensho* and other forms of non-dual awareness. It is strengthened in open awareness meditations that draw heavily on the alerting, lower attentional system.
- Being-oriented

Strengthening Allocentric Processing

- As one perspective increases, the other decreases. Normal ego/allocation fluctuations occur ~ 3-4/minute.
- With “contact,” allocentric processing increases briefly as the new stimulus is considered in its own right; then egocentric processing surges forward as one figures out what to do about the “feeling tone” (pleasant, unpleasant, neutral) of the stimulus.
- Open awareness practices in which there are many moments of new contact could incline the brain toward allocentric modes.
- Lower regions of the thalamus and its reticular cap - with concentrations of GABA neurons - inhibit egocentric processing.
- Reducing wanting reduces egocentric processing.

Liking and Wanting

- Distinct neural systems for liking and wanting
- In the brain: feeling tone --> enjoying (liking) --> wanting --> pursuing
 - Wanting without liking is hell.
 - Liking without wanting is heaven.
- The distinction between *chandha* (wholesome wishes and aspirations) and *tanha* (craving)
- But beware: the brain usually wants (craves) and pursues (clings) to what it likes.



Takng Life Less Personally

Using Mindfulness to Relax Selfing

- Notice how little “I” there is in many activities (e.g., reaching for salt, cuddling); take in that sense of minimal selfing combined with life being OK.
- Notice how “I” changes; see how it grows in response to threats, opportunities, and contact with others; consider the apparent “I” as a process rather than as an being.
- Focus on present moment experience as a process.
- Be mindful of yourself as the protagonist in the “mini-movies” running in the mind.
- Beware presuming that others are intentionally targeting you.

“Bahiya, you should train yourself thus.”

In reference to the seen, there will be only the seen. To the heard, only the heard. To the sensed, only the sensed. To the cognized, only the cognized.

When for you there will be only the seen in the seen, only the heard in the heard, only the sensed in the sensed, only the cognized in the cognized, then, Bahiya, there's no you in that.

When there's no you in that, there's no you there. When there's no you there, you are neither here nor yonder nor between the two.

This, just this, is the end of all suffering.

*Be wisdom itself,
rather than a person who isn't wise
trying to become wise.*

*Trust in awareness, in being awake,
rather than in transient and unstable conditions.*

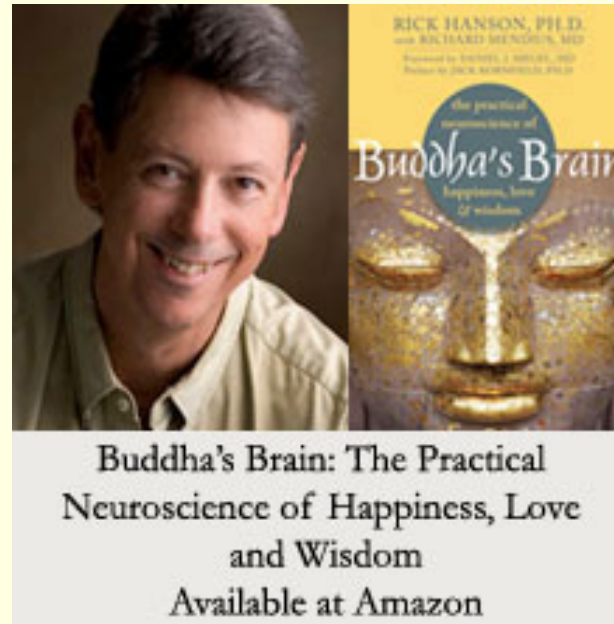
Ajahn Sumedho

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