

The Wise Brain Bulletin

News and Tools for Happiness, Love, Productivity, and Wisdom

Volume 1, 1 (1/16/07)

© 2007

Rick Hanson, Ph.D.
drrh@comcast.net

Rick Mendius, M.D.
jrichardmendius@aol.com

Greetings

Welcome to the first issue of the Wise Brain Bulletin, bringing you skillful means – from the fertile common ground of psychology, neurology, and Buddhism – for personal well-being, relationships, work, and spiritual development.

We invite you to offer your own favorite perspectives and methods, as well. Each of these issues will be archived on our website – www.WiseBrain.org (coming in the next month or so) – which we hope will grow into collaborative, searchable, Consumer-Reports-meets-Wikipedia resource for powerful and sophisticated self-help methods.

In this broad context, we have a particular interest in using contemplative wisdom and brain science to illuminate each other to spotlight more effective ways to “use your mind to change your brain to benefit your mind” – especially for householders on the path of Awakening.

In the Buddhist tradition, the Bulletin is offered freely, and you are welcome to share it with others. You can subscribe by contacting either one of us, and opt out any time. (And its formatting can only get better!)

Recent Arrivals

If you just did the “Awakening Your Brain” workshop at Spirit Rock last Saturday, an especially warm welcome to you. Approximately 250 people attended, and there was remarkable attention and depth of questions during a long day.

Good Attachments

Attachment isn't *always* bad – especially in the form of the handouts from the two workshops: the slide shows, summary of methods, glossary, and selected readings (as PDF files for easy access).

As soon as our website is up, we'll also post the attachments sent to the participants at the first workshop (The Neurology of Awakening), which include a powerful method for opening the heart, a meditation on gratitude, a list of ways to deepen householder practice, how to take in the good, and an article on cultivating wholesome intentions.

The next few Bulletins will have articles attached on topics like:

- The proper balance of “being with” the contents of mind – in an open, mindful, nonmanipulative way – and “working with” them to cultivate wholesome qualities and reduce unwholesome ones (this was a hot, even controversial topic at the most recent daylong)
- How to activate the parasympathetic nervous system (and dampen the stressful sympathetic nervous system)
- The foundations of the Noble Eightfold Path
- The neurology of inner strength, happiness, and equanimity.

Meanwhile, in the next week or so, we should be able to (finally) post the sound files from the first and second workshops, and we will email you the link to the website where you can download them.

Good in the Beginning, Good in the Middle, and Good in the End

This is the classic phrase describing the *dharma*: the Buddha’s analysis of reality and the path leading to the end of suffering. Each Bulletin will offer some of our favorite quotations (from the Buddha unless otherwise indicated) – please send in your own! – and judge for yourself (as the Buddha recommended) if they have value for you.

The teachings below focus on **generosity** – an appropriate topic for the start of the year, when we all look ahead to see what we’d like to nurture in our own life and contribute to others – which is the first thing the Buddha asked people to consider as they began to undo their suffering:

“A person makes a living by what he or she gets. A person makes a life by what he or she gives.”

Adapted from Winston Churchill

“The principal virtues a [person] should possess, leading to future welfare, are: (1) [conviction] . . . , (2) moral discipline . . . , (3) generosity . . . , and (4) wisdom”
Bhikkhu Bodhi, *In the Buddha’s Words*, 111.

“And how is a [householder] accomplished in generosity? . . . a [householder] dwells at home with a mind devoid of the stain of stinginess, freely generous, open-handed, delighting in relinquishment, one devoted to charity, delighting in giving and sharing.”
Anguttara Nikaya 8:54

Personal Stories

We would like to begin posting personal accounts of trying to do something skillful with your mind, and how it turned out. The support of good company is one of the great buttresses of coping, well-being, and – even – Liberation, and your own adventures in the inner world could offer much to others.

Funny failures, poignant lessons, profound transformations, tiny changes that made a big difference . . . all of this is welcome if it's sincere and could help others. It's OK to disguise personal details, and we can publish anonymously or with your name on it. Please try to keep your story under 100 words, write reasonably clearly, and know that we may do some editing.

Offerings

1. Beginning Tuesday, February 13 (7 - 9 pm), we'll be offering a monthly training in "wise brain" skills, held in central Marin (we'll let you know soon about the dates of the other Tuesdays over the rest of the year). The first topic will be how to activate your parasympathetic nervous system: not a very sexy-sounding topic, to be sure, but that wing of your autonomic nervous system is the bedrock of coping with stress, feeling peaceful, and steadying the mind.

You can drop in on just one of these trainings or come to all of them. The fee (in large part to cover expenses) is on a sliding scale, from \$50 to whatever you can afford, including nothing, so cost should never be a factor.

Please let us know if you want to come to the first class session. We will be getting out information about the location as soon as we pin it down. And we would deeply appreciate it if you would put the word out through your own networks about this class, as well.

2. You might enjoy seeing a 15-minute or so clip of us on Starfish Health, a Comcast TV program. It's on at 7 pm this Thursday, January 18, on Comcast channels throughout the Bay Area (the table for what channel where is in the email cover sheet that went out with this Bulletin). If you have a digital cable box, you can watch the show any time: Go to channel 888, select Health and Wellness, select Starfish Health, and then select our show, "Manual for the Mind."

3. Rick Hanson and Manny Mansbach, MFT co-lead an ongoing sitting group on Wednesday evenings, 6:45 – 8:30, at the A Sante day spa on 3rd Street near A Street in downtown San Rafael. The atmosphere is informal and welcoming, with a combination of meditation and dharma talks for beginners and experienced meditators alike, and you can drop in once or come regularly. (Rick is giving a talk elsewhere this Wednesday, January 17, and so Manny will lead the group alone that night, but

normally both Rick and Manny are present.)

4. On Sunday, May 27, at Spirit Rock Meditation Center, we could be presenting “On One Wing and Two Prayers: Practicing with a Wounded Brain.” It is for people interested in well-being and contemplative depth who are also grappling with depression, significant anxiety (or trauma), ADD/ADHD, head injury, or dementia – or caregivers who work with this population. You can go to the Spirit Rock website in the next few weeks to get more information and register.

5. Depending on people’s interest, we could be giving revised versions (learning from our experience . . .) of the two workshops – the Neurology of Awakening and Awakening Your Brain – later in 2007, perhaps offered on a weekend during which one could take either or both of them. What do you think?

6. We’re talking with Christina Feldman, a senior Vipassana teacher and a *wonderful* person, about doing a weekend workshop on October 6-7, 2007, that is about deepening equanimity from psychological, neurological, and dharma perspectives. Please let us know if you’d be interested in that, and we will keep you posted with the details.

7. We intend to begin organizing “guerilla research” on wise brain tools that is rigorous and publishable but more informal, more reliant upon collaborative community support, and much cheaper than most academic research. We are interested in developing large data sets (in part, through efficient on-line surveys) and drawing upon the real-life experiment of an increasingly practiced population of meditators – and their brains.

Tentatively, the first study will be on ways to “customize” greater equanimity (since people come to this vital capacity through different pathways). As a general principle, learning more about how to *systematically individualize* growth in well-being and spiritual practice is a very important development for both Western psychology and Buddhism for householders. Already, a remarkable group of scholars and clinicians is coming together to get this going. If you have a research background and would like to help, we would so appreciate that, and please contact us.

8. Very soon, the non-profit Heartwood Institute for Neuroscience and Contemplative Wisdom will be established and have 501c3 (tax-deductible) status. This is the umbrella for our work on “applied neurodharma” and the various programs described here. If you are interested in participating with the Institute or donating to it, that would be very, very welcome.

10. Our friend, teacher, and mentor, James Baraz, is launching another round of his really excellent course, *Awakening Joy*. We commend it to your attention, and here's the link to his website: <http://www.awakeningjoy.info/index.html>

Biochem Corner

To have a well-rounded toolbox, Bulletins will sometimes address physical methods for nurturing positive states of mind. Here, Jan Hanson, M.S., L.Ac. (janhealth@comcast.net) follows up her presentation at the recent *Awakening Your Brain* workshop, which covered nutrients that foster inner peace (see that slide show and the piece on Methods):

First of all, any nutritional supplementation always rides on the back of a good diet. That means three quality meals each day that include the following:

- Protein – At *every* meal, especially breakfast, have one or two servings (about the size of a deck of cards) from sources such as eggs, chicken, low-mercury fish, beef, beans and other legumes, almonds, soy nuts, etc. Cheeses are also a good source (from goats if you are allergic to milk products).
- Vegetables – One can't say enough about getting several cups of vegetables per day, including leafy greens, root vegetables, and cruciferous vegetables.
- Earth-based carbohydrates – These include whole grains, potatoes, yams, beans, etc. that are *not* processed. Minimize flour products (e.g., bread, cereal, pasta); even whole-grain ones are processed.
- Healthy oils – Olive oil is best for cooking. Consume modest amounts of saturated fat, and eliminate partially hydrogenated oils.

This diet creates a healthy base for body and brain health. It also helps balance blood sugar. For many, low blood sugar feels like anxiety: nervous, agitated, shaky; not exactly inner peace.

Second, a couple of basic supplements are the foundation for the specialized nutrients I described at the workshop:

- A good multi-vitamin/mineral complex – With high dosages of B-vitamins and something approaching the Daily Value of most minerals, this often requires several pills.
- Omega-3 oils – Purified fish oil is best for your brain and body (try Nordic Naturals in a health food store). Take enough to get about 500 mg. of DHA and EPA (which will be listed on the back of the bottle). If you are a vegetarian and cannot use fish oil, you can take 1 tablespoon/day of flax oil, but note that many people cannot convert flax oil very efficiently into DHA and EPA, which are essential for brain health. If you are considering one departure from being a strict vegetarian, this is a good one.

Perspectives on Self-Care

Please be responsible and careful with all forms of self-help, including those presented here, which are no substitute for working with a licensed healthcare practitioner. Be patient and kind to yourself (not self-critical!) as you try and learn new things. People vary, and what works well for someone else may not be a good fit for you. Particularly if you feel psychologically or physically fragile, or are in especially stressful circumstances, start slowly and carefully if you try something. And in all cases, stop immediately if something feels bad or is making things worse.

About Us

Rick Hanson, Ph.D. began meditating in 1974 and has practiced in several traditions. He started sitting at Spirit Rock around 1996 and joined its Board in 1999; Christina Feldman has been his principal teacher, with a focus on concentration and insight in householder life. A clinical psychologist, author, and parent of two teenagers, he has written and taught extensively on the five essential inner skills of both Buddhism and psychology. Currently in the Community Dharma Leader training program, he has co-lead a six-session class on Mindfulness 101 and now co-leads a Wednesday evening sitting group at Dominican University.

Rick Mendius, M.D. is a neurologist in private practice in Marin County. He trained at UCLA as an epileptologist under Jerome Engel and as a neurobehaviorist under Frank Benson and Jeff Cummings. He has been on the teaching faculty of UCLA, Oregon Health Sciences University, and Stanford University. His meditation practice began in the 1980s with Shinzen Young in Los Angeles, and continues at Spirit Rock with Jack Kornfield, Phillip Moffitt, Ajahn Amaro, and Ajahn Sumedho. He teaches a weekly meditation class at San Quentin. His daughters, Courtney and Taryn, and his son, Ian, are three of his main teachers and companions on the path.

Closing Thoughts

Consider this Old Swedish proverb, contributed by one of the workshop participants:

Fear less, cherish more;
eat less, chew more;
whine less, breathe more;
talk less, listen more;
hate less, love more;
and all good things are yours."