

The Wise Brain Bulletin

News and Tools for Happiness, Love, and Wisdom
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Relaxing the Self

Editor's note: This is the final chapter of
[Buddha's brain: The Practical Neuroscience of Happiness, Love, and Wisdom](#)
(New Harbinger, 2009). See the book itself for the references.

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*To study the Way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget
the self. To forget the self is to be enlightened by all things.*

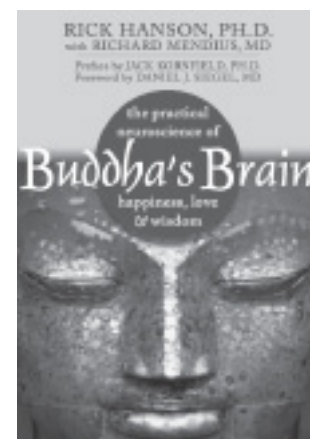
—Dogen

(with Richard Mendius, M.D.)

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Now we come to perhaps the single greatest source of suffering—and therefore to what it's most important to be wise about: the apparent self. Look into your own experience. When you take things personally—or hunger for approval—what happens? You suffer. When you identify with something as “me” or try to possess something as “mine,” you set yourself up for suffering, since all things are frail and will inevitably pass away. When you stand apart from other people and the world as “I,” you feel separate and vulnerable—and suffer. On the other hand, when you relax the subtle sense of contraction at the very nub of “me”—when you're immersed in the flow of life rather than standing apart from it, when ego and egotism fade to the background—then you feel more peaceful and fulfilled. You may have experienced this under a starry night sky, at the edge of the sea, or when your child was born. Paradoxically, the

less your “I” is here, the happier you are. Or, as both Buddhist monks and inmates on death row sometimes say: “No self, no problem.” At some point in life, we all ask the same question: Who am I? And no one really knows the answer. The self is a slippery subject—especially when it's the subject that is regarding itself as an object! So let's begin by grounding this airy topic with an experiential activity—taking the body for a walk. Then we'll investigate the nature of the self in your brain. Last, we'll explore methods for relaxing and releasing “self-ing” in order to feel more confident, peaceful, and joined with all things.



Click this cover to learn more
about Buddha's Brain

(For more on this profound matter, which reaches far beyond the scope of a single chapter, see Living Dhamma by Ajahn Chah, The Book: On the Taboo Against Knowing Who You Are by Alan Watts, I Am That: Talks with Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj, or The Spiritual Teaching of Ramana Maharshi.)

Taking the Body for a Walk

Try to do this exercise with as little sense of an “I” as possible. If you become uncomfortable in any way, focus your attention on basic physical sensations, such as in your feet or hands

Exercise

Relax. Be aware of your body breathing.

Establish the intention to let go of the personal self as

much as you can, and see what that’s like.

Be aware of breathing. Be breathing. There’s nothing else to do. No need for the self to do anything.

Feel as safe as possible. Relax any sense of threat or aversion. No need to mobilize the self for protection.

Feel peacefulness rising and falling with each breath. No need to grasp at any pleasure.

Keep letting go. Let go with every exhalation. Let go of the self with every exhalation.

Relax any control of breathing. Let the body manage breathing, just like it does during sleep.

Breathing continues. Awareness continues. There is spacious awareness with little sense of self. Peaceful and pleasant, no need for self. Awareness and the world going on, doing all right without a self.





Slowly move the gaze around. Sights need no self to receive them. Explore small movements, without a self directing them. A finger moves a little, weight shifts in the chair. Intentions prompt those movements, but no “I” needs to guide them.

Gently stand up without self guiding the standing. There is awareness of standing here, but does there need to be a self here?

Move a little while standing, perceptions and movements happening without needing an owner or director of those experiences.

Then explore walking about, slowly or quickly. Without needing self to do so. Perceptions and movements occurring without anyone identifying with those experiences. Take a few minutes for this.

After a while, sit down again. Rest in breathing, simply present, being aware. Thoughts about the self, or thoughts from the perspective of “I,” are just contents of awareness like any other, not special in any way.

Relax and breathe. Sensations and feelings are just contents of awareness arising and dispersing. Self, too, arises and disperses in awareness, not a problem at all. Just self coming and going as it may. No problem at all. Relax and breathe. See what’s present when self is absent. Relax and breathe. No problem at all.

Reflections

It may be a little hard to move back into the realm of verbal thought. While reading here, explore the sense of words comprehended without a self doing the comprehending. Notice that the mind can perform its functions just fine without a self in charge.

Looking back on the exercise:

- What was the experience of self, “I,” or “mine?” What does self feel like? Is it a pleasant or unpleasant experience? Is there a sense of contraction when self increases?
- Is it possible to do many mental and physical activities without much sense of self?
- Was the self always the same, or did different aspects come to the forefront at different times? Did the intensity of the self change, too—was the sense of “I” sometimes strong and sometimes subtle?
- What led the self to change? What effects did fear or anger have, or other thoughts of threat? What effects did desire have, or other thoughts of opportunity? What

Greetings

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effects did other people have, either encountered or imagined? Does the self exist independently, or does it arise and change depending on causes and conditions?

Self in Your Brain

The experiences of self you just had—that it has many aspects, is just part of the whole person, is continually changing, and varies according to conditions—depend on the physical substrates of self in your brain.

Thoughts, feelings, images, and so on exist as patterns of information represented by patterns of neural structure and activity. In the same way, the various aspects of the apparent self – and the intimate and powerful experience of being a self – exist as patterns in the mind and brain. The question is not whether those patterns exist. The key questions are: What is their nature? And does that which those patterns seem to stand for – an “I” who is the unified, ongoing owner of experiences and agent of actions – truly exist? Or is self like a unicorn, a mythical being whose representations exist but who is actually imaginary?



Self Has Many Aspects

The many aspects of self are based on structures and processes spread throughout the brain and nervous system, and embedded in the body’s interactions with the world. Researchers categorize those aspects of self, and their neural underpinnings, in a variety of ways. For example, the reflective self (“I am solving a problem”) likely arises mainly in neural connections among the anterior cingulate cortex, upper-outer prefrontal cortex (PFC), and hippocampus, while the emotional self (“I am upset”) emerges from the amygdala, hypothalamus, striatum(part of the basal ganglia), and upper brain stem (Lewis and Todd 2007). Different parts of your brain recognize your face in group photos, know about your personality, experience personal responsibility, and look at situations from your perspective rather than someone else’s (Gillihan and Farah 2005).

The autobiographical self (D’Amasio 2000) incorporates the reflective self and some of the emotional self, and it provides the sense of “I” having a unique past and future. The core self involves an underlying and largely nonverbal feeling of “I” that has little sense of the past or the future. If the PFC—which provides most of the neural substrate of the autobiographical self—were to be damaged, the core self would remain, though with little



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The Institute is a 501c3 non-profit corporation, and it publishes the Wise Brain Bulletin. The Wellspring Institute gathers, organizes, and freely offers information and methods – supported by brain science and the contemplative disciplines – for greater happiness, love, effectiveness, and wisdom. For more information about the Institute, please go to www.wisebrain.org/wellspring.html

sense of continuity with the past or future. On the other hand, if the subcortical and brain stem structures which the core self relies upon were damaged, then both the core and autobiographical selves would disappear, which suggests that the core self is the neural and mental foundation of the autobiographical self (D'Amasio 2000). When your mind is very quiet, the autobiographical self seems largely absent, which presumably corresponds to a relative deactivation of its neural substrate. Meditations that still the mind, such as the concentration practices we explored in the previous chapter, improve conscious control over that deactivation process.

The self-as-object arises when you think about yourself – “Would I rather eat Chinese or Italian food tonight? How come I’m so indecisive?” – or when associations to yourself spontaneously arise in awareness. These representations of “me” are contents within a narrative that stitches together momentary snapshots of self into a kind of movie of a seemingly coherent self over time (Gallagher 2000). Narrative self-referencing relies on midline cortical structures (Farb et al. 2007), as well as on the junction of the temporal and parietal lobes, and on the back end of the temporal lobe (Legrand and Ruby 2009). These regions of your brain perform numerous other functions, too

(e.g., thinking about other people, making evaluations), so they cannot be said to be specifically related to the self (Legrand and Ruby 2009). Representations of the self flit through them amidst all sorts of other mental contents, jostling together like different twigs and leaves in a stream, apparently without any neurologically special status.

More fundamentally, the self-as-subject is the elemental sense of being an experiencer of experiences. Awareness has an inherent subjectivity, a localization to a particular perspective (e.g., to my body, not yours). That localization is grounded in the body’s engagement with the world. For example, when you turn your head to scan a room, what you see is specifically related to your own movements. The brain indexes across innumerable experiences to find the common feature: the experiencing of them in one particular body. In effect, subjectivity arises from the inherent distinction between this body and that world; in the broadest sense, subjectivity is generated not only in the brain but in the ongoing interactions the body has with the world (Thompson 2007).

Then the brain indexes across moments of subjectivity to create an apparent subject who—over the course of development, from infancy to adulthood—is elaborated and layered through the maturation of the brain, notably regions of the prefrontal cortex (Zelazo, Gao, and Todd 2007). But there is no subject inherent in subjectivity; in advanced meditation practices, one finds a bare awareness without a subject (Amaro 2003). Awareness requires subjectivity, but it does not require a subject.

In sum, from a neurological standpoint, the everyday sense of being a unified self is an utter illusion: the apparently coherent and solid “I” is actually built from many subsystems and sub-subsystems over the course

of development, with no fixed center, and the most fundamental basis of the sense of “I” – subjectivity – emerges in the field of interactions the body has with the world.

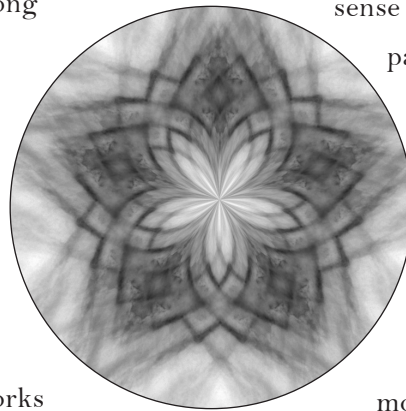
Self Is Just One Part of a Person

A person is a human body-mind as a whole, an autonomous and dynamic system that arises in dependence upon human culture and the natural world (Mackenzie 2009). You’re a person and I’m a person. Persons have histories, values, and plans. They are morally culpable and reap the consequences of what they sow. The person goes on being as long as the body is alive, and the brain is reasonably intact. But as we’ve seen, self-related mental contents have no special neurological status and are just part of the ongoing stream of mental activity. Whatever aspect of self that is momentarily active engages only a small fraction of the brain’s many networks (Gusnard et al 2001; Legrand and Ruby 2009). Even those aspects of self that are stored in explicit and implicit memory take up only a portion of the brain’s storehouse of information about the world, perceptual processing, skilled action, and more. The self is just one part of the whole person.

Further, most aspects of a person can buzz merrily along without an “I” directing them. For example, most of your thoughts arise without any deliberate creation. We all routinely engage in many mental and physical activities without “I” making them happen. In fact, often the less self the better, since that improves many kinds of task performance and emotional functioning (Koch and Tsuchiya 2006; Leary, Adams,

and Tate 2006). Even when it seems like the self has made a conscious decision, that choice is often the result of unconscious factors (Galdi, Arcuri, and Gawronski 2008; Libet 1999).

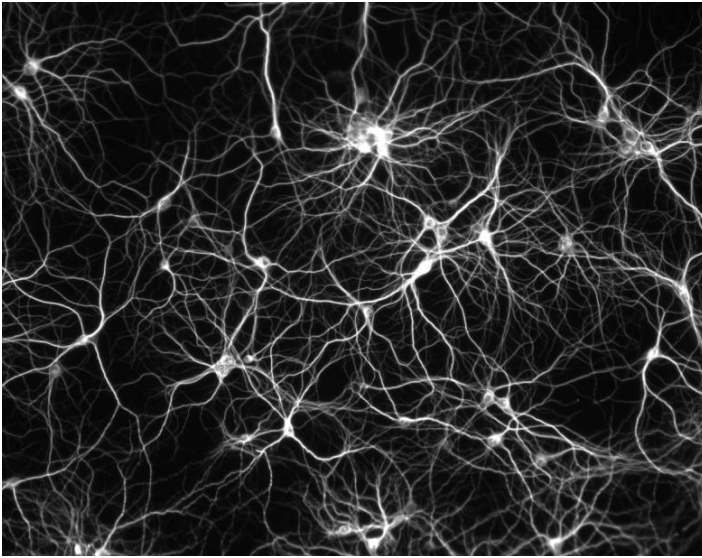
In particular, awareness does not need a self to operate. Aspects of self arise and disperse within awareness, but awareness persists as a field of consciousness independent of the vicissitudes of self. To experience this, be mindful of the first second or two of hearing or seeing something new. At first there is often just the barest perception crystallizing in awareness, with no sense of a being, an “I” who is perceiving it; then it’s possible to observe a growing sense of self linked to the perception, particularly if it is personally significant.



But it is directly apparent that awareness can do its job without a subject. We routinely presume that there is a subject of consciousness because consciousness entails subjectivity, as we saw above, and the brain indexes across moments of subjectivity to find an apparent subject. But subjectivity is just a way to structure experience; it’s not an entity, a subject, a ghostly being looking out through your eyes. In fact, observing your own experience shows that the self – the apparent subject – often comes in after the fact. In many ways, the self is like someone running behind a parade that is already well under way, continually calling out: “See what I created!”

Self Keeps Changing

As different parts of self come forward and then give way to other parts, so do the momentary neural assemblies that enable them. If the energy flows of



these assemblies could be seen as a play of light, an extraordinary show would move endlessly about your head. In the brain, every manifestation of self is impermanent. The self is continually constructed, deconstructed, and constructed again.

The self seems coherent and continuous because of how the brain forms conscious experience: imagine a thousand photographs overlaying each other, each one taking a few seconds to develop into a clear picture and then fade out. This composite construction of experience creates the illusion of integration and continuity, much like twenty-two static frames per second create the semblance of motion in a movie. Consequently, we experience “now” not as a thin sliver of time in which each snapshot of experience appears sharply and ends abruptly, but as a moving interval roughly 1–3 seconds long that blurs and fades at each end (Lutz et al. 2002; Thompson 2007). It is not so much that we have a self, it’s that we do self-ing. As Buckminster Fuller famously said, “I seem to be a verb.”

Self Depends on Conditions

At any moment, the parts of self that are present depend on many factors, including genetic heritage, personal

history, temperament, and situations. In particular, self depends a lot on the feeling tone of experience. When the feeling tone is neutral, the self tends to fade into the background. But as soon as something distinctly pleasant or unpleasant appears—for example, an interesting email or a physical pain—the self quickly mobilizes along the processing cascade that moves from feeling tone to craving, and from craving to clinging. The self organizes around strong desires. Which comes first: Do “I” form a desire? Or does desire form an “I?”

The self also depends greatly on social context. Walk along casually: often not much sense of self. But bump into an old acquaintance, and within seconds many parts of the self come online, such as memories of shared experiences—or wondering how you look.

Self never comes forward on its own. For starters, it developed over several million years, shaped by the twists and turns of evolution (Leary & Buttermore 2003). Then at any moment today, it arises through neural activities that depend on other bodily systems, and those systems depend on a network of supporting factors ranging from grocery stores to the seemingly arbitrary but remarkably provident physical constants of this universe, which enable the conditions for life such as stars, planets, and water. The self has no inherent, unconditional, absolute





An Apparent Self Has Its Uses

An apparent self is good for some things. It is a convenient way to distinguish one person from another. It brings a sense of continuity to life's kaleidoscope of experiences, linked to each other by appearing to happen to a particular "me." It adds verve and commitment to relationships—"I love you" is a much more powerful statement than "There is love arising here."

A sense of self is present at birth in nascent form (Stern 2000), and children normally develop substantial self structures by age five; if they don't, their relationships are profoundly impaired. Self-related processes are wired into the brain for good reasons. They helped our ancestors succeed in increasingly social hunter-gatherer bands in which interpersonal dynamics played a strong role in survival; reading the self in others and expressing one's own self skillfully were very useful in forming alliances, mating, and keeping children alive to pass on one's genes. The evolution of relationships fostered the evolution of self and vice versa; the benefits of self have thus been a factor in the evolution of the brain. Self has been stitched into human DNA by reproductive advantages slowly accumulating across a hundred thousand generations.

The point here isn't to defend or justify the self. But neither should we demean or suppress it. Just don't make self special—it's simply an arising mental pattern that's not categorically different from or better than any other mind-object. When you use the methods that follow, you're not resisting the self or making it a problem. You're just seeing through it and encouraging it to relax, to dissipate like morning fog clearing under the sun. And what's left behind? Open-hearted spaciousness, wisdom, values and virtues, and a soft sweet joy.

existence apart from the network of causes it arises from, in, and as (MacKenzie 2009).

Self Is Like a Unicorn

Self-related representations abound in the mind and thus in the brain. Those patterns of information and neural activity are certainly real. But that which they point to, explicitly or implicitly—a unified, enduring, independent "I" who is the essential owner of experiences and agent of actions—just doesn't exist. In the brain, self-related activities are distributed and compounded, not unified; they are variable and transient, not enduring; and they are dependent on changing conditions, including the interactions the body has with the world. Just because we have a sense of self does not mean that we are a self. The brain strings together heterogeneous moments of self-ing and subjectivity into an illusion of homogeneous coherence and continuity. The self is truly a fictional character. Sometimes it's useful to act as if it's real, as we'll see below. Play the role of the self when you need to. But try to keep remembering that who you are as a person—dynamically intertwined with the world—is more alive, interesting, capable, and remarkable than any self.

Release Identification

One way the self grows is by equating itself to things—by identifying with them. Unfortunately, when you identify with something, you make its fate your own—and yet, everything in this world ultimately ends. So be mindful of how you identify with positions, objects, and people. A traditional inquiry is to ask questions like these: Am I this hand? Am I this belief? Am I this sense of “I”? Am I this awareness? Perhaps follow the question with an explicit answer, such as: No, I am not this hand.

Be especially watchful about identifying with the executive functions (e.g., monitoring, planning, choosing). Notice how often your brain just as successfully makes plans and choices without much “I” involved, such as while driving to work. Be mindful as well about identifying with awareness; allow awareness to arise without needing to identify with or direct it. Regard “I,” “me,” “mine,” and other forms of self as just more mind-objects—thoughts like any other. Remind yourself: I am not thoughts. I am not these thoughts of “I.” Don’t identify with the self! Don’t use self words (“I,” “me,” “myself,” and “mine”) any more than necessary. Try to get through a specific period of time, such as an hour at work, without using them at all.

Let experiences flow through awareness without identifying with them. If this stance were verbalized, it would sound something like this: Seeing is happening. There is sensation. Thoughts arise. A sense of self

emerges. Move, plan, feel, and talk with as little presumption of self as possible.

Extend this mindfulness to the mini-movies playing in the simulator of your mind. Notice how a presumption of self is embedded in most of these movies, even when the self is not an overt character. This embedding reinforces the self—neurons fire and wire together in simulations, too. Instead, cultivate a general attitude, also reaching into the mini-movies, that events can be perceived from the perspective of a particular body-mind without there needing to be an “I” to do the perceiving.

Generosity

Self also grows through possessiveness. It’s like a knotted fist: when you open the hand to give, there’s no more fist, no more self.

You can give so much in this life, which offers you so

many opportunities to release the self. For example, you can give time, helpfulness, donations, restraint, patience, noncontention, and forgiveness. And any path of service—including raising a family, caring for others, and many kinds of work—

incorporates generosity.

Envy—and its close cousin, jealousy—is a major impediment to generosity. Notice the suffering in envy, how it is an affliction upon you. Envy actually activates some of the same neural networks involved with physical pain (Takahashi et al. 2009). In a compassionate and kind

San Rafael Meditation Group

Open to beginners and experienced practitioners, we meet on Wednesday evenings in downtown San Rafael. “Early-bird” meditation starts at 6:45 with formal instruction at 7:00; meditation ends at 7:30, followed by a brief break, and then a dharma talk and discussion, ending at 8:30. It is led by Rick Hanson, and for more information, check out www.WiseBrain.org/sanrafaelmeditation.html. Newcomers are always welcome!



way, remind yourself that you will be all right even if other people have fame, money, or a great partner—and you don't. To free yourself from the clutches of envy, send compassion and loving-kindness to people you envy. Once, on a meditation retreat, I was thinking enviously about some people I knew, and I found a surprising peace in this wish toward them: May you have all the success that I lack.

Also, observe perceptions, thoughts, emotions, and other mind-objects, and inquire: Does this have an owner? Then observe the truth of things: This has no owner. It's fruitless to try to possess the mind; no one owns it.

Healthy Humility

Perhaps most of all, self grows through self-importance; its antidote is healthy humility. Being humble means being natural and unassuming, not being a doormat, ashamed, or inferior. It just means you're not setting your self above others. Humility feels peaceful. You don't have to work at impressing people, and no one is at odds with you for being pretentious or judgmental.

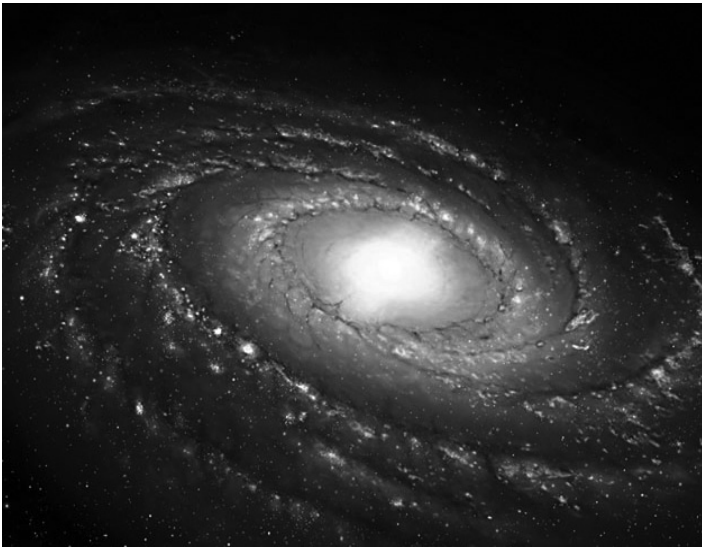
Be Good to Yourself

Paradoxically, it supports humility to take good care of yourself, since self networks in your brain activate when you feel threatened or unsupported. To reduce this activation, make sure your fundamental needs are well cared for. For example, we all need to feel cherished. Empathy, praise, and love from others—especially in childhood—are internalized in neural networks that support feelings of confidence and worth. But if you receive these in short supply over the years, you're likely to end up with a hole in your heart.

The self gets very busy around that hole! Trying to cover the pain it holds with overconfidence, or to fill it up through clinginess. Besides being annoying to others—leading you to receive less empathy, praise, and love than ever—these strategies are self-defeating, since they don't address the fundamental issue.

Instead, fill the hole in your heart by taking in the good (see chapter 4), one brick at a time. When I was younger, the hole in my heart looked about as big as the excavation for a skyscraper. When I realized that it should and could get filled, I deliberately looked for evidence of my worth, such as the love and respect of others, and my good qualities and accomplishments. Then I'd take a few seconds to soak in the experience. After several weeks and lots of bricks, I started to feel different; within a few months, there was a significantly greater sense of personal worth. Now, many years and thousands of bricks later, that hole in my heart is pretty full.

No matter how big your own hole is, each day hands you at least a few bricks for it. Pay attention to good things about yourself and the caring and acknowledgement of others—and then soak them in. No single brick will eliminate that hole. But if you keep at it, day by day, brick by brick, you'll truly fill it up.



Like many practices, being good to yourself is a kind of raft to get you across the river of suffering—to use a metaphor from the Buddha. When you get to the other side, you’ll no longer need the raft. You’ll have built up your internal resources to the point that you won’t have to consciously look for evidence of your worth anymore.

Relax About What Others Think

We evolved to care greatly about our reputation, since reputation affected whether others in the band would help or hurt an individual’s chances of survival (Bowles 2006). It is wholly human to wish to be respected and even cherished, and to seek that for yourself. But getting caught up in what others think is a different matter. As Shantideva said (1999, p.113):

Why should I be pleased when people praise me?
 Others there will be who scorn and criticize.
 And why despondent when I’m blamed,
 Since there’ll be others who think well of me?

Consider how much time you spend thinking—in even the subtlest way, in the back of the

simulator—about what others think of you. Be mindful of doing things to get admiration and praise. Try to focus instead on just doing the best you can. Think about virtue, benevolence, and wisdom: if you sincerely keep trying to come from these, that’s about all you can do. And it’s a lot!

You Don’t Need to Be Special

Believing that you need to be special in order to deserve love and support sets a really high bar that takes much effort and strain to clear—day after day after day. And it sets you up for self-criticism and feelings of inadequacy and worthlessness if you don’t get the recognition you crave. Instead, try wishing yourself well in these ways: May I be loved without being special. May I contribute without being special.

Consider renouncing specialness—including being important and admired. Renunciation is the antithesis of clinging, and thus a radical path to happiness. Say phrases like these in your mind, and notice what they feel like: I give up being important. I renounce seeking approval. Feel the peace in this surrender.

Love the person you are, much as you would care about





any person dear to you. But don't love the self or any other mere mind-object.

Joined with the World

The sense of self grows when you separate from the world. Therefore, deepening the sense of connection with the world will reduce the sense of self.

To live, to have a metabolism, your body must be joined with the world through continuing exchanges of energy and matter. Similarly, your brain isn't fundamentally separate from the rest of the body that feeds and protects it. Therefore, in a deep sense your brain is joined with the world (Thompson and Varela 2001). And as we've seen many times, the mind and the brain form an integrated system. Consequently, your mind and the world are intimately joined together.

You can help this recognition deepen in a variety of ways:

- Reflect on the flows of food, water, and sunlight that sustain your body. See yourself as an animal like any other in your dependence on the natural world. Spend time in nature.
- Pay attention to the aspect of space in your environments, such as the empty volume of air in your living room, or the space through which cars move on

your way to work. Doing this naturally draws awareness to things as a whole.

- Think bigger and wider. For example, when you buy gasoline, consider the great network of causes that help produce the apparent self—driving its car, perhaps feeling stressed or preoccupied—including the gas station, global economics, and ultimately, ancient plankton and algae crushed under the earth into oil. See how those causes depend on an even vaster network that includes the solar system, our galaxy, other galaxies, and the physical processes of the material realm. Try to feel the living truth that you arise and abide in dependence upon the whole universe. The Milky Way is here because of the local group of galaxies; the sun is here because of the Milky Way; and you're here because of the sun—in some ways you're here because of galaxies millions of light years away.

- If you can, go all the way out to the ultimate frame: the allness, the totality that is everything. For example, the world you see at hand, including your body and mind within it, is always just one whole thing. At any moment, you can notice this one allness. Its parts change, endlessly. They unravel, decay, and disperse, every single one of them. Therefore, no part can ever be a reliable, enduring source of true happiness—including the self. But the allness as allness never changes. The whole remains reliably whole. The whole never clings and suffers. Ignorance contracts from the totality into the self. Wisdom reverses that process, emptying the self out into allness.

It's a wonderful paradox that as individual things—such as the self—feel increasingly groundless and unreliable, the totality of everything feels increasingly safe and comforting. As the sense of groundlessness grows, each apparently individual thing seems a bit like a cloud that you'll fall through if you try to stand on it. At

first this is pretty unnerving. But then you realize that the sky itself—the totality—is holding you up. You are walking on the sky because you're sky. It has always been that way. You and every one else have been sky all along

Joined with Life

One time a friend of mine went on a meditation retreat in a forest monastery in Burma. He took vows, including not to intentionally kill any living being. After a couple of weeks, his meditation was not going very well. He also began to wonder about the latrine near his hut. It was a pit toilet, and after using it, he was supposed to clean the area around the hole with water, but there were usually ants nearby which were washed away. He asked the abbot if this was all right. "No," the abbot said simply, "that's not your vow." My friend took the abbot's comment seriously, and started cleaning the toilet much more carefully. And, perhaps not coincidentally, his meditation deepened dramatically.

How often do we place our convenience ahead of the life of another being, even an ant on a toilet? It's not deliberately cruel, but it is self-centered. Look the creature in the eye—the mosquito, the mouse—and know that it wants to live, just like you do. How would it feel to be killed for someone's convenience?

If you want, take on the practice of never killing for your own convenience. This will draw you into feeling more kinship with all life, you as a creature in harmony with other beings. You'll be treating the world as an extension of yourself: not harming yourself involves not

harming the world.

Similarly, kindness to the world is kindness to yourself. As the self starts to relax and fall away, you can really wonder how to live. Once on a retreat, I experienced such a strong sense of everything as a whole that I began to despair at the utter unimportance of my tiny part of it. My life could not possibly matter. After hardly sleeping, I sat outside the dining hall before breakfast, near a little creek, with a doe and her fawn grazing under the trees close by. I began to feel very deeply that each living thing has its nature and its place in the whole. The doe licked her fawn, nuzzling and nibbling it. She clearly belonged where she was, eventually to die and disperse but meanwhile thriving and contributing in her own way. Insects and birds rustled in the fallen leaves as well: all moving about, each one creating benefits for the whole in some way.

Perspectives on Self-Care

Be careful with all self-help methods (including those presented in this Bulletin), which are no substitute for working with a licensed healthcare practitioner. People vary, and what works for someone else may not be a good fit for you. When you try something, start slowly and carefully, and stop immediately if it feels bad or makes things worse.

Just as each of those animals had its place and its contributions, I had my own. Not one of us was important. But it was all right to be in my place and thrive there. It was all right

to relax and be the whole. To be the whole expressed as a part, to be a part expressing the whole.

Sometime later a gray squirrel and I watched each other from just a few feet apart. It was natural to wish that squirrel well, that it find acorns and dodge owls. (And, in the complexity of the forest, to wish the owl well too, that it find a squirrel to ease its hunger.) We looked at each other for a strangely long time, and I truly wished the best for that squirrel. Then another thing came clear: I was an organism, too, just like the squirrel. It was all

right to wish myself well just like any other living being.

It is all right to wish yourself well, just like wishing the best for any living being. It is all right to do well according to your nature, with a human brain, going as far as you can in this life down the path of happiness, love, and wisdom.



What remains when self disperses, even temporarily? The wholehearted movement to contribute, and the wish to thrive and prosper as one human animal among six billion. To be healthy and strong and live many more years. To be caring and kind. To awaken, abiding as radiant, spacious, loving consciousness. To feel protected and supported. To be happy and comfortable, serene and fulfilled. To live and love in peace.

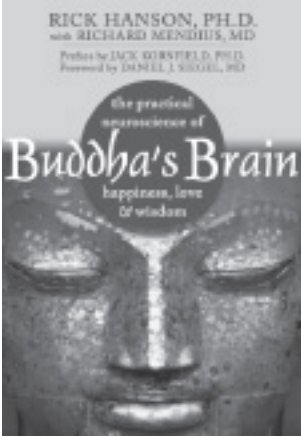


Chapter 13: Key Points

- It's ironic and poignant that the "I" makes you suffer in many ways. When you take things personally, identify with or try to possess things that inevitably end, or separate yourself from all things, you suffer. But when you relax the sense of self and flow with life, you feel happy and satisfied.
- When you take the body for a walk—or do just about anything—without much sense of self, you discover some interesting things: the self usually feels a little contracted and tense, it is often unnecessary, and it continually changes. The self gets especially activated in response to opportunities and threats; desires often form an "I" before the "I" forms desires.
- Thoughts, feelings, images, exist as patterns of information based on patterns of neural structure and activity. In the same way, representations of the self and the sense of being a self exist as patterns in the mind and brain. The question is not whether those patterns exist. The key questions are: What is their nature? And does that which they point to – a unified, ongoing owner of experiences and agent of actions – truly exist?
- The many aspects of self are based on numerous neural networks. These networks perform many functions unrelated to the self, and representations of self within them don't appear to have any neurologically special status.
- The self is just part of the person. Most thoughts, plans, and actions don't need a self to direct them. Self-related neural networks comprise only a small part of the brain, and an even smaller part of the nervous system.
- The self keeps changing; in the brain, every manifestation of the self is impermanent. Just as the individual frames in a movie create the illusion of motion, the overlapping neural assemblies that flow together and then disperse create the illusion of a coherent and continuous self.
- The self arises and changes depending on various conditions, notably pleasant and unpleasant feeling tones. It also depends on relationships—including with the wider world. The most fundamental basis for the sense of "I" – the subjectivity inherent in awareness – merges in the relationship between the body and the world. The self has no independent existence whatsoever.
- Self-related mental activity, including the sense of being the subject of experience, refers to a unified, enduring, independent "I" who is the essential owner of experiences and agent of actions – but such a one does not exist. The self is a collection of real representations of an unreal being – like a story about a unicorn.
- The self is useful for relationships and for a healthy sense of psychological coherence over time. Humans have a sense of self because it served vital survival functions during our evolution. It is pointless to be averse to the self, since aversion intensifies the self. The point is to see through the self and let it relax and disperse.
- The self grows through identification, possession, pride, and separation from the world and life. We explored many ways to disengage from these and feel an openhearted spaciousness and soft sweet joy.

Offerings

1. ***Buddha's Brain: The Practical Neuroscience of Happiness, Love, and Wisdom*** is now available. You can learn more about it and order it at www.rickhanson.net/writings/buddhas-brain. By Rick Hanson, PhD (with



Rick Mendius, MD; preface by Jack Kornfield, PhD and Foreword by Dan Siegel, MD), this book draws on the historically unprecedented integration of modern neuroscience and ancient contemplative wisdom to show you how to use your mind to change your brain to change your life.

On Friday evening, January 15, 2010, there will be a **benefit for the Spirit Rock Meditation Center Scholarship Fund in celebration of the publication of *Buddha's Brain***.

The evening will include fun experiential practices from the book, readings, and big picture reflections about brain science and spiritual life. See www.spiritrock.org/calendar/display.asp?id=RR1E10 for more info.

2. Rick Hanson will teach a residential workshop at Esalen, in Big Sur, CA, on **Neural Pathways to Happiness, Love, and Wisdom**. It will be held Friday evening, January 22, 2010 through Sunday morning, January 24. Learn how to guide your brain to improve concentration and memory, feel safer and stronger, be more intimate with yourself and others, and deepen mindfulness and meditation. In particular, learn how to defeat the built-in “negativity bias” of your brain by weaving positive resources into your brain and your self. (With Jan Hanson, M.S., L.Ac.) (CEU’s available). See www.esalen.org/workshops/searchfiles/workshopdetail.lasso?Op=eq&RecordNum=8195&-session=Reservation_Session:47CC8FBA1663d2347CTuQ3CB5852 for more information.

3. The “two Ricks” – Mendius and Hanson – have produced a 3 CD set with Sounds True called **Meditations to Change Your Brain**. This program combines fascinating insights with seven powerful guided practices that you can use routinely to change your own brain for the better. For more info, go to Amazon (www.amazon.com/Meditations-Change-Your-Brain-Hanson/dp/159179711X/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1247945310&sr=8-1) or Sounds True (www.shop.soundstrue.com/shop.soundstrue.com/SelectProd.do;jsessionid=D684B884BEAF8107013C3B4395A03811?prodId=1979&manufacturer=Sounds%20True&category=Spiritual%20Teachings&name=Meditations%20to%20Change%20Your%20Brain).

4. The **Just One Thing** newsletter offers one simple practice each week that can bring you more joy, more fulfilling relationships, and more peace of mind and heart. It’s the law of little things: a small thing repeated each day adds up over time to produce big results. See www.rickhanson.net/writings/just-one-thing.

5. At Spirit Rock in 2009, these daylongs with Rick Mendius and Rick Hanson are scheduled (CEUs available):

- **The Hard Things That Open the Mind and Heart: Practicing with Difficult Conditions**, led with James Baraz, on Sunday, December 13. This is for people grappling with difficult conditions – both internal and external – and for caregivers and friends who support those individuals. These include challenges with the body, mind, and life circumstances. We'll cover Buddhist perspectives and practices for difficult conditions; lovingkindness for oneself and for any being who suffers; brain-savvy ways to strengthen your capacity to be with the hard stuff; and methods from the intersection of the dharma and neuroscience for lifting mood and cultivating joy. See www.spiritrock.org/calendar/display.asp?id=JB3D09 for more info.

The remaining listings all refer to **2010**.

6. At Spirit Rock, these daylongs with Rick Mendius and Rick Hanson are scheduled (CEUs available); see www.spiritrock.org/calendar/default.asp?pageid=271 for info:

- **The Neurology of Awakening**, on Sunday, February 27. We'll cover how to nurture the brain states that foster the steadiness of mind leading to the deepest and most liberating insights. This is our foundational workshop, with solid neurology and practical tools for activating, step-by-step, the brain states of the Buddha's progressive process of contemplative illumination.

- **Equanimity**, on Saturday, May 29. Equanimity is the key to freedom from emotional reactions, and to cutting the chain of craving and clinging that leads to suffering. This workshop will also address the neuropsychology of difficult emotions, as well as trauma, and neurologically-informed methods for dealing with those.

- **The Neurodharma of Love**, on Saturday, July 17. The emphasis will be on relationships in general and love in the broadest sense, integrating deep teachings on compassion and lovingkindness with a clear-eyed understanding of how we evolved to be caring toward "us" and often wary and aggressive toward "them."

- **The Hard Things That Open the Mind and Heart: Practicing with Difficult Conditions**, led with James Baraz, on Saturday, October 23. This is for people grappling with difficult conditions – both internal and external – and for caregivers and friends who support those individuals. These include challenges with the body, mind, and life circumstances. We'll cover Buddhist perspectives and practices for difficult conditions; lovingkindness for oneself and for any being who suffers; brain-savvy ways to strengthen your capacity to be with the hard stuff; and methods from the intersection of the dharma and neuroscience for lifting mood and cultivating joy.

- **Not-Self in the Brain**, on Saturday, December 11. This workshop will address the thorny and fundamental question of . . . "me, myself, and I." The self – with its tendencies to grasp after possessions and take things personally – is

perhaps the premier engine of suffering. We'll explore the evolution of the apparent self in the animal kingdom, and the ways in which the self is real and is also not real at all, coming to rest more and more in the underlying spacious awareness in which self appears and disappears.

7. At Kripalu Center in Massachusetts, Rick Hanson will teach **Lighting up Your Own Circuits of Joy and Inner Peace** on Sunday, March 14 through Wednesday, March 17. This experiential, residential program uses the new field of contemplative neuroscience to offer many practical ways to light up your own neural circuits of concentration and blissful absorption; taking in good experiences to feel happier and more confident; your natural core of inner peace, contentment, and love; and joyful oneness with all things. For more information, go to www.kripalu.org/program/view/IB-101/buddhas_brain_lighting_up_your_own_circuits_of_happiness.

8. At the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies, Professor William Waldron (Middlebury College) and Rick Hanson will teach a residential workshop – **Self and No-Self in Buddhist Thought, Meditation, and Neuroscience** – on Friday evening, March 19 through Sunday morning, March 21. Nothing is as confusing in Buddhism as the idea that there is no enduring, unchanging self, nor as liberating as letting go of our clinging to selfhood. We'll explore Buddhist teachings on how our sense of self arises and constructs our everyday reality. The workshop will also teach traditional meditative techniques for watching how "self" arises from moment to moment. Buddhist understandings of "self" will be illustrated, where appropriate, in relation to modern neuroscience and psychology. See www.bcbs.dharma.org/Pages/course_detail.lasso?-KeyValue=103&-Token.Action=&image=1 for info.

9. At the Psychotherapy Networker Symposium in Washington, DC, March 25-28, Rick will present a one-day workshop on **The New Neuroscience of Happiness, Love, and Wisdom**. The historically unprecedented meeting of modern brain science and ancient contemplative wisdom offers therapists powerful new insights and tools. We'll begin by reviewing how mindfulness and meditation change the brain and therefore the mind. Next we'll cover simple brain-savvy things a client can do to feel calmer and stronger. Then we'll focus on how to use contemplative neuroscience in three down-to-earth ways: to help clients become more mindful, to weave positive experiences into the fabric of the brain and self, and to stimulate and strengthen the three neural circuits of empathy. Throughout, there'll be practical examples and experiential activities that you can use in your practice, and handouts to adapt as client materials. (CEUs available) See www.psychotherapynetworker.org/current-symposium for info.

10. At the London Insight Meditation Center, Rick Hanson will be presenting **The Neurology of Awakening** on Sunday November 22. See www.londoninsightmeditation.org.uk/programme/schedule for more information (click on Daylong Retreats).

11. Rick Hanson has a chapter, **7 Facts about the Brain That Incline the Mind to Joy**, in *Measuring the Immeasurable* – which is chock full of essays from luminaries like James Austin, MD, Larry Dossey, MD, Daniel Goleman,

PhD., Candace Pert, PhD, Marilyn Schlitz, PhD, Dan Siegel, MD, Charles Tart, PhD, and Cassandra Vieten, PhD.

Check it out at www.amazon.com/Measuring-Immeasurable-Scientific-Case-Spirituality/dp/1591796547.

12. Sounds True offers **Meditations for Happiness** by Rick Hanson, Ph.D. It's 3 CD's worth of talks and brain-savvy exercises for increasing your happiness, with an emphasis on experiential practices and practical tools. It is offered as an inexpensive download to your computer, where you can listen to it or burn it to CD's or transfer it to an iPod.

This program truly turned out to be pretty great, and here's a comment about it from the author, Annie Spiegelman:

On his new "Meditations for Happiness" program, benevolent Rick Hanson guides me to sit down and face my inner critic – and then actually see it as a form and shrink it. Being a Master Gardener, I see the critic as a gnome who tiptoes into my brain when no one is looking, with those tiny pointy shoes, and makes me doubt myself. I shrink him down to the size of a snail and toss him out. He knows nothing. The shoes are a dead giveaway.

Here's the link to this program at Sounds True:

www.shop.soundstrue.com/shop.soundstrue.com/SelectProd.do;jsessionid=91E06512A8A5D4D222A639DA4C1ED2F9?prodId=1715&manufacturer=Sounds%20True&category=Exploring%20the%20Psyche&name=Meditations%20for%20Happiness

Fare Well

May you and all beings be happy, loving, and wise.

