

# The Wise Brain Bulletin

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*Featured Article:*

## ***Dual Brain Process and the Gender Distinction***

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If you search Google for “dual brain,” what you will mostly find are articles relating to the division of the brain into two hemispheres. Most recent research however considers this categorical distinction between two sides as an oversimplification that fails to reflect adequately the complexity of processes that spread across the divide.

### ***“Masculine” and “Feminine” In The Brain?***

In the days when this division was considered more absolute and uncomplicated than it is now – and alas still today in places where we should know better - the two sides of the brain were often assigned to gender. The left hemisphere, more concerned with sequential processing and language, was labeled “the masculine brain,” and the right hemisphere, specialized for holistic processing and imagery became the ‘feminine’ brain. I have always felt uncomfortable with

this labeling, considering it to be unhelpful yet unignorable, as beneath the arguments of the politics of gender, some very important facts were lurking. Thus, a few years ago I wrote about what I called “feminine voice.” This was something that I felt we needed to consider in search of well-being.

Here is how I wrote about it then:

*What is the feminine voice? I believe that there are qualities that we may in conventional understanding and speech correctly term “feminine” in distinction from “masculine.” I think that our reception of many of the feminine qualities, indeed our labeling of them, is not essential but has arisen from convention, society and expectation. Most importantly, I believe they are not the exclusive property of women but belong to us all. Perhaps one can envision a sliding spectrum of qualities, masculine one pole, feminine the other, and each of us, man or woman, is placed (or place ourselves) somewhere on this scale. That these qualities are largely artificially human-designated does not matter: that their*

*labels are usually man-made and rarely women-made may. For they are the exclusive property neither of men nor of women, but belong to both and, I contend, need to be equally valued. That the so-called feminine values have been undervalued is the problem, not that they are designated as feminine. That such values have been used to define and to limit what is considered "womanly" or "manly" is the problem not the designation. This has wounded women obviously, and men less obviously but still profoundly. In a patriarchal world we have had a hierarchy of values, through the greater valorization of one term – the masculine – at the expense of the other – the feminine. What we all need and must surely seek now is a plurality of values, a revalorization of the feminine, and a turn to ways of connection and co-operation rather than competition.*

## Greetings

The Wise Brain Bulletin offers skillful means from brain science and contemplative practice – to nurture your brain for the benefit of yourself and everyone you touch.

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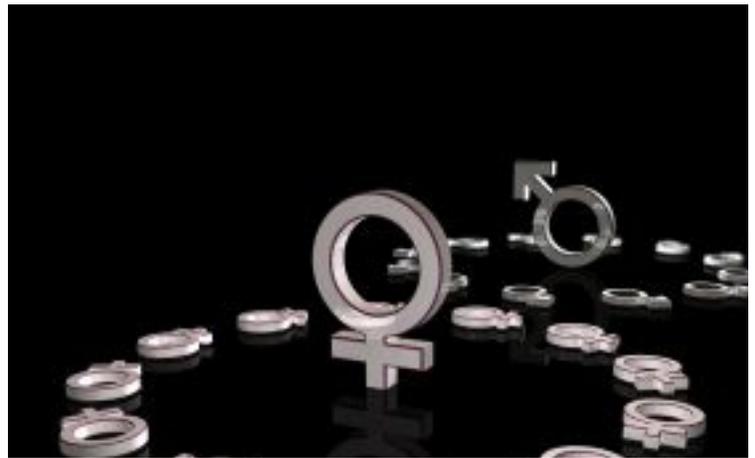
Rick Hanson, PhD edits the Bulletin, and it's designed and laid out by Michelle Keane.

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*So what are these "feminine" qualities that belong to us all? I would say that they are best described by the Yin qualities of the Chinese Taoist philosophy, the necessary counterbalance to those Yang qualities: receptivity as opposed to activity; listening as opposed to discourse, being in contrast to doing, collaboration rather than competition, connection and integration rather than analysis, and a great attention to feeling and intuition rather than dependence only on cognition and reason. As one enumerates these qualities it is easy to see how devalued in practice many of them have*

*become, and how feminists, acknowledging this, have understandably resisted identification with them....*  
(Gay Watson, *Beyond Happiness*, 2008, 139)

Whenever I have taught or read from this section of my book, despite my care in trying to avoid the most obvious and overt of gender politics, I have felt a change in the atmosphere around my audience. However careful I have been to try and avoid the most obvious of gender distinctions and politics, however much I have tried to sidestep the nature-nurture debate, the moment I have touched on this subject the ambience changes and a sense of division, rivalry, hurt and distress always seems to slip in.



## Doing and Being

So why am I reconsidering this now? When I wrote the passage in italics above, I had cited research that came from a team that spoke of two main modes of the mind, one concerned with "doing" and one with "being" (Segal, et al., *Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy for Depression*, 2002, 69-75). A year or so later, a conversation with a colleague, Rick Hanson, led to him sending me his working model of how two different patterns of mental activity (which included the doing/being distinction) were based on two distinct neural substrates. He also shared a recent research paper that supported this model (Farb et al., *Attending to the Present, SCAN*, 2007, 313-322) – and I noted that the Farb paper was co-written by one of the same authors as the Segal

book on mindfulness.

## Medial and Lateral Modes

In the Farb paper, the authors distinguish between a narrative focus (NF), which mostly occurs in the medial areas of the brain, and experiential focus (EF), which engages lateral areas. Their research explored these modes with the help of fMRI (brain imaging). The brain was observed under two conditions: (1) focused, self-referential thinking about the ways that adjectives like “friendly” or “cautious” might apply to oneself in the past and present (NF), and (2) relaxed, open, non-judgmental awareness of the present-moment reactions arising in the mind to the same words (EF). Most interestingly the research shows that one of these styles, the narrative focus, has come to act as a default mode of operation.

Both sources – the Segal book and the Farb paper – focus on the implications of their findings. In the earlier, Segal book, the authors had been concerned with the task of mindfulness training as teaching individuals to become more aware of their modes of mind, and to instill the skills to move from an unhelpful mode to one more conducive to liberation from depression. In the more recent, Farb paper, the focus was on cultivation of mindfulness to disengage from automatic default modes, though, here too, the authors were interested in the implications of these findings for the alleviation of mood and anxiety disorder. As well, other research has suggested that approaching self-experience through a more immediate present-centered focus may be beneficial to human well-being (R.J. Davidson, “Well-being and affective style: neural correlates and biobehavioral correlates,” *Phil. Trans. Royal Society*, 2004, 1395-1411).

Reading this article and especially noticing the list of qualities that related to each of the modes that had been developed by Rick Hanson, I saw that they overlapped strongly with the qualities of masculine and feminine voice that I had proposed. Here are the processes and qualities identified by Rick that are associated with each of these two modes of being.

<i>Medial Mode (NF)</i>	<i>Lateral Mode (EF)</i>
Mainly representational	Mainly sensory
Much verbal activity	Little verbal activity
Abstract	Concrete
Focused on past or future	Present oriented
Goal directed doing	Being
Personal self directed	Impersonal
Focal view	Panoramic
Evaluative	Non-judgemental
Self as subject or object	Minimal self as subject/object

I see that not all of these map directly onto my list of feminine and masculine qualities, though I think there is sufficient overlap to be significant. It would be fascinating to know if any research has been done on gender differences in these two modes.

## Gender Similarities Outweigh Differences

At the same time I read another article entitled Gender Similarities Hypothesis (Janet Shipley Hyde, *American Psychologist*, 2005). On the basis of meta-analyses of earlier research, Hyde’s paper strongly upholds the argument that, in stark contrast to the popular mass media view of males and females as vastly psychologically different (e.g., Mars and Venus), they are in fact similar in most, but not all, psychological variables. She suggests that men and women, girls and boys, are

more alike than they are different. The exceptions, where the greatest gender difference is seen, are in the field of motor performance, with lesser but significant distinctions in measures of sexuality



and aggression. This would seem to give some credit to my previously unsubstantiated view of a spectrum of qualities and variations within both genders, and to support my desire to avoid talk of gender differences, with its endless arguments as to nature or nurture, hard-wiring or culture, when the subject of my interest is in the implications of different qualities and processes of thought for our well-being.

### ***Anima and Animus***

In the last century C.G. Jung used the concept of Archetypes to illuminate a similar understanding, teaching that within men there was the strong presence of the feminine – the Anima – and for women (though his teaching here was rather less clear), the Animus. Failure to integrate these complementary poles into our psychic lives would result in projecting our incompleteness onto actual members of the opposite sex in the belief that union with them will result in our wholeness. Our task is to achieve individuation, the evolution of our own unique and complex individuality, through acknowledging and taking back our projections.

## ***Moving Beyond Gender Distinctions***

My initial interest in gender distinctions, apart from my personal experience as a woman, arose from interest in the implications rather than in the distinctions themselves. My curiosity about the two modes – medial and lateral – is also largely concerned with the implications of this knowledge for the achievement of wholeness and the benefits of mindfulness training. If future research continues to show beneficial results of enhanced lateral neural network activation – which is associated with a sense of mindful presence – the methods of cultivating or shifting into this mode become important. For example, it is known that sensing the whole body as a single gestalt, surprise and not-knowing, and open space awareness all light up lateral circuits. These are not activities that would seem to be promoted by our current lifestyles or standard forms of education. On the other hand, the mental activities known to correlate with the medial activation in the brain – including verbal thought, task focus, and sense of threat or opportunity – would certainly seem to suggest why medial activation seems to be the default mode of most people due to our current cultural conditioning.

I have begun to wonder if talking in terms of these different modes of processing might not be a new way to talk about implications and practices without focusing on gender distinctions, thus avoiding many of the emotional and political traps that seem inevitable if one mentions male or female, masculine or feminine. These two modes are just different ways of brain processing – although one of them (medial/narrative), probably due to cultural bias, has become the default. For those of us who are concerned with the implications of gender distinctions, rather than

those distinctions themselves, and also with the possibilities of training to change default responses, perhaps these two modes of neural processing might offer a new way of talking about certain desirable and undesirable qualities and practices without getting into the emotional mire of gender distinction. What is important is the response itself, not the expected possessor of such a response.

Let us get away from seeing a mode of response as male or female, but rather as focused or panoramic, active or passive, and, freed from emotional disturbance and historical argument, let us freely explore how we may enhance healthy process and response and vitiate unhealthy. Most of all, let us work out how we may improve the ability to move freely from one side of the spectrum to the other, exploring all possibilities without loss of balance, and without worry as to where on the spectrum of gender this mode has once been situated. In this way we may perhaps be able both to enhance well-being and alter gender bias.

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## **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.

## **The Wellspring Institute for Neuroscience and Contemplative Wisdom**

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](http://www.wisebrain.org/wellspring.html).

# *A Meditation for Anxiety and Stress*

Editor's note: This selection is from an excellent new book on how to use mindfulness to feel less stressed, and more resilient and happy. Reprinted with permission by New Harbinger Publications, Inc. *A Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction Workbook*, Bob Stahl, Ph.D. and Elisha Goldstein, Ph.D. [www.newharbinger.com](http://www.newharbinger.com)

As you've been working your way through this book, you've learned quite a bit about the stress reaction, its ill effects on well-being, and how mindfulness can help. You've done some exploration of your own stressors and how they affect your life, as well as habitual patterns that may be exacerbating your stress or anxiety. Hopefully this information and exploration has motivated you to devote time to the practices you've learned so far—both informal practices that you can weave into your day-to-day life and the formal practices we've guided you through, such as the mindful check-in, mindful breathing, the body scan, and seated mindfulness meditation. Now you're ready to integrate all of this information, exploration, and practice in a meditation designed specifically for working with anxiety and stress. This practice combines mindful breathing, the body scan, and mindfulness of thoughts with a new practice: mindful self-inquiry. While all of the explorations and practices in this book will help you develop mindfulness and better cope with stress, adding self-inquiry to the mix

will make your practice more effective by focusing in on the issues and situations most relevant to your life and your stress.

## **Mindful Self-Inquiry**

Mindful self-inquiry is an investigation into the nature of one's own mind and being. In the context of this book, that inquiry looks into physical sensations, emotions, and thoughts that may be contributing to stress and anxiety. In your



daily life, you may be so busy doing that you feel you have little or no time for self-reflection. Yet this exploration is extremely worthwhile, as fears often lie beneath the surface of awareness.

When you practice mindful self-inquiry, you bring kind awareness and acknowledgment to any stressed or anxious feelings in the body and mind and simply allow them to be. This means staying with those feelings without analyzing, suppressing, or encouraging them. Although this may seem scary in and of itself, realize that when you allow yourself to feel and acknowledge your worries, irritations, painful memories, and other difficult thoughts and emotions, this often helps them dissipate. By going with what's happening rather than expending energy fighting or turning away

from it, you create the opportunity to gain insight into what's driving your concerns. When you begin to understand the underlying causes of your apprehension, freedom and a sense of spaciousness naturally emerge. In essence, this is a process of learning to trust and stay with feelings of discomfort rather than trying to escape from or analyze them. This often leads to a remarkable shift; time and again your feelings will show you everything you need to know about them—and something you need to know for your own well-being.

### ***Informal Practice: RAIN***

A little later in this chapter, we'll guide you through a meditation for self-inquiry into stress and anxiety. In the meantime, you can use the acronym RAIN as an informal practice for working with mindful self-inquiry

**R = Recognize** when a strong emotion is present.

**A = Allow** or acknowledge that it's there.

**I = Investigate** the body, emotions, and thoughts.

**N = Non-identify** with whatever is there.

RAIN is an insightful self-inquiry practice that you can bring into your daily life to help you discover deeper threads of what triggers strong emotional reactions. Throughout the next week, bring recognition to any strong emotion and allow it to be present. Investigate what you feel physically, mentally, and emotionally and see where it takes you. The last element, non-identification, is very useful because it helps to deflate the mind's stories and cultivates the understanding that strong emotions are just another passing mind state and not a definition of who you are. It's like going to a movie, where you sit back and watch the actors play out the drama. By seeing your story

as impermanent and not identifying with it, you'll begin to loosen the grip of your own mind traps. This will help create the space for you to be with things as they are and deepen your understanding



of what drives, underlies, or fuels your fears, anger, and sadness. It also grants you the freedom to look at the situation differently and choose a response other than what may be dictated by your story.

### ***Turning Into Emotions***

Turning into difficult emotions can feel a bit foreign, since our culture so often emphasizes suppressing, denying, or eradicating pain. Isn't it time to start acknowledging these parts of ourselves rather than continuing to avoid or ignore them? If we learn to view these challenges as rites of passage instead of running away from them, we'll gain the opportunity to learn and grow, and perhaps even change the circumstances that lead to distress.

Have you ever wondered why it's called "life insurance" when it's really death insurance?

Have you ever wondered why it's called "health insurance" when it's really sickness insurance?

These questions may sound silly, but they serve as a reminder of how pervasively the media and our culture shift the focus from difficult topics.

We're surrounded by messages indicating that we should stay young, have a great body, and turn to medications anytime we're sick, sad, or scared.

While taking medication can at times be vital

for health and well-being, it's also important to cultivate inner resilience in dealing with stress, pain, and even illness.



Turning into difficult emotions and facing stress, anxiety, or pain isn't an easy path. It may seem unsafe, and you may have to overcome a feeling of unwillingness. But what else is there to do? As the saying goes, "You can run, but you can't hide." You're likely to find that when you don't deal with your pain, it gets larger, and eventually it may get too heavy to carry any further.

### ***Bob's Story: A Personal Inquiry***

Many years ago, I was on the telephone in my office, talking with a hospital administrator about the mindfulness-based stress reduction program. I felt that she didn't understand one of my concerns and wasn't being supportive of the program. As the conversation went on, I began to feel upset and almost lashed out at her. Fortunately, I looked at my clock and realized I needed to end the call because I had an appointment.

After the appointment I was still upset about the phone call, so I tried to ground myself by bringing awareness to the breath, but my mind immediately wandered back to the phone

conversation and got all caught up in the story again. I began to fume, thinking, "When I get done with this meditation, I'm going to call her and let her have it!" Recognizing that I had wandered off, I acknowledged, "Oh, wandering mind," but before I knew it, I was right back there again, getting mad and thinking about how I was going to get retribution. Eventually I realized that I was extremely angry, perhaps beyond what the conversation called for, and needed to investigate this further.

I began my mindful self-inquiry into the anger by simply recognizing and acknowledging that I was indeed very angry. I tried to simply feel into the anger without attempting to figure it out. It was challenging and uncomfortable, and more than once I found myself right back in my reactive story. Eventually, I began to feel another emotion emerging: sadness—a big sadness. I felt into the sadness in the same way, and in time, it opened to a memory of not feeling understood by other hospital administrators while trying to enlighten them about mindfulness. As I stayed with the feeling of not being understood, I began to feel there was more to be revealed. I continued feeling into the pain, and gradually a deeper insight arose. I recognized an old and familiar feeling of not being seen, understood, or accepted by others. As I felt into that, I realized just how much of my life I'd spent trying to get approval or validation from others. It was painful to realize this, but it was also tremendously freeing. Now that I understood what was being triggered, I realized that I didn't need to continue or escalate the "conflict" with the hospital administrator. In fact, when I reflected on our conversation, I realized that she was actually trying to be supportive, but my preconceptions and habitual patterns stood in the way of my seeing that.

## *Finding Your Heart*

In mindful self-inquiry, you learn to acknowledge and investigate any feelings you'd like to know more about. Though it may be challenging, turning toward fears and other difficult feelings can reveal hidden jewels. Acknowledging your fears and inquiring into them in this way will open the door to deeper understanding, and with it, compassion and peace.

In her poem "Unconditional," Jennifer Paine Welwood eloquently describes this journey and the potential it offers for profound transformation:

*Willing to experience aloneness,  
I discover connection everywhere;  
Turning to face my fear,  
I meet the warrior who lives within;  
Opening to my loss,  
I gain the embrace of the universe;  
Surrendering into emptiness,  
I find fullness without end.  
Each condition I flee from pursues me,  
Each condition I welcome transforms me,  
And becomes itself transformed  
Into its radiant jewel-like essence.  
I bow to the one who has made it so,  
Who has crafted this Master Game;  
To play it is purest delight—  
To honor its form, true devotion.*  
-Jennifer Paine Welwood, "Unconditional"  
(1998)

## *Fare Well*

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

## *Words of Wisdom*

You can explore the universe looking for somebody who is more deserving of your love and affection than you are yourself, and you will not find that person anywhere.  
-Buddhist saying

"The most precious gift we can offer others is our presence. When mindfulness embraces those we love, they will bloom like flowers." -Thich Nhat Hanh

"On life's journey faith is nourishment, virtuous deeds are a shelter, wisdom is the light by day and right mindfulness is the protection by night. If a man lives a pure life, nothing can destroy him." -The Buddha

"Generosity is another quality which, like patience, letting go, non-judging, and trust, provides a solid foundation for mindfulness practice. You might experiment with using the cultivation of generosity as a vehicle for deep self-observation and inquiry as well as an exercise in giving. A good place to start is with yourself. See if you can give yourself gifts that may be true blessings, such as self-acceptance, or some time each day with no purpose. Practice feeling deserving enough to accept these gifts without obligation—to simply receive from yourself, and from the universe." -Jon Kabat-Zinn

"The most fundamental aggression to ourselves, the most fundamental harm we can do to ourselves, is to remain ignorant by not having the courage and the respect to look at ourselves honestly and gently." -Pema Chödrön

"True happiness, we are told, consists in getting out of one's self; but the point is not only to get out - you must stay out; and to stay out you must have some absorbing errand." -Henry James