

The Wise Brain Bulletin

News and Tools for Happiness, Love, Effectiveness, and Wisdom
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Featured Article:

Gratitude

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For many of us, the holiday season is a mixed bag. It is a joyful time of year, when families and friends gather in celebration to reaffirm their love and commitment to one another. It can also be a nostalgic time, when we feel our losses and disappointments more acutely. And it's a time of shopping deadlines, invitations, greeting cards, out-of-town visitors, and elaborate meals, all of which have the potential to bring us joy or stress or both. Practicing gratitude is an especially beneficial way to counter the painful emotions and stressors that come with the holiday season.

For our hunter-gatherer ancestors, opening themselves to the good in their lives did not have the same evolutionary urgency as remembering and reacting to the bad. The biological inclination to feel threatened and react served

them well. It kept them alive in extreme environments, and allowed them to pass their genes on to us, who are less well-served today by the inclination to register and react to whatever threatens us or causes discomfort.

In fact, this hard-wired tendency is the cause of many emotional, physical and psychological problems, some large, many small. Gratitude, the experience of what is good in one's life, even abundantly good, is a powerful and direct antidote to thoughts and feelings of being threatened.

What follows are three brief essays stitched together into one article: a meditation on gratitude, an exercise to help open your heart to the good in your life, and a reflection about the real gifts of the season.

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Greetings

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

The Bulletin is offered freely, and you are welcome to share it with others. Past issues are archived at www.WiseBrain.org.

Rick Hanson, PhD and Richard Mendius, MD are regular contributors to the Wise Brain Bulletin, and since its inception it has been designed and laid out by Laurel Hanson. This month we welcome Stephanie Daigre, our new Managing Editor. We welcome your contributions, and to subscribe, please contact Rick at drh@comcast.net.

I am grateful for my children - if I have any - for the delight and love they bring, for the sweet smell of their hair and the soft touch of their skin. For the first time they smiled at me or walked into my arms. For the meaning they bring to life. For receiving my love and lessons. For being their own persons, for giving me their own love and lessons. Having them at all is a miracle, and the rest is details.

I appreciate myself. For the love I have given to others, for all the conversations had, for all the helpful acts toward others, for all the dishes done. For the long hours I've worked, the hoops I've jumped through to keep all those balls up in the air. For the efforts I've made, the many times I've stayed patient, the many times I've found more to give inside when I thought I was empty.

I appreciate my lovers and mates, past and present. I can focus on one of these persons, perhaps my spouse

A Meditation on Gratitude

Set aside a quiet time during which you can reflect on some of the many things you could be thankful for. As a starting point, you might read the passage below to yourself or out loud, adapting it to your situation as you like.

There really is so much to be thankful for.

I am grateful to my friends. For their good qualities, for the good things they have done for me. For the ways they are fun, for the good times we've had.

or mate if I'm currently in a relationship, and bring to mind the ways he or she has been good to me. I appreciate the fun we've had together, the humor and the companionship. I feel grateful for the times of support, understanding, and sympathy. For sweating and suffering too.

I feel thankful for the life I've already had, for the good parts of my childhood, for everything I've learned, for good friends and beautiful sights. For the roof over my head and the bread on my table, for being able to have a life that is healthier, longer, and freer than most people have ever dreamed of. For this beautiful world, where each breath is a gift of air, each dawn a gift of light. For the plants and animals that die so I may live. For the extraordinary gifts of evolution I carry in each cell of my body, for the capabilities accumulated during three and a half billion years of life's presence on our planet.

I feel thankful for the wonder of the universe, for all the atoms in my body—the carbon in my bones, the oxygen and iron in my blood—that were born in the heart of a star billions of years ago, to drift through space, to form a sun and planets, to form the hand that holds this piece of paper and the eye that reads this word.

I feel thankful for all that was in order for me to be. For grace, for wisdom, for the sacred, for spirit as I know it. For this moment, this breath, this sight. For every good thing that was, that is, that ever will be.

Opening Your Heart

Compassion and lovingkindness are central elements of living well. They are also a beautiful path of spiritual practice. And they just feel good.

Western psychology is beginning to find that working with compassion and related heartfelt feelings has both mental and physical benefits.

For example, the Institute of HeartMath (in Boulder Creek, California) has researched connections between the heart and emotional well-being.

Even a regular heartbeat - e.g., 60 times a minute - still has a little variability in the interval between each beat. A large and smoothly changing variation in those intervals changes your brain waves, activates the parasympathetic nervous system, lowers blood pressure, supports the immune system, and has other health benefits.

It also helps you feel more peaceful and happy and caring.

So let's try a simple technique that can bring your heart beat into a healthier rhythm. It has three parts:

- Breathe in such a way that the length of your inhalation and exhalation are the same (perhaps counting in your mind to make the breaths even).
- Imagine that the breath is coming into and out of the

area of your heart.

- As you breathe evenly through your heart, call to mind a pleasant, heartfelt emotion such as gratitude, kindness, contentment, or love -- perhaps by thinking about a happy time, being with your children, gratitude for the good things in your life, a close friend, etc. You can also imagine that feeling moving through your heart as part of the breath.

Why don't you try this for a few minutes, right now?

Just three to five cycles of this sort of breathing can have a noticeable effect. Also try five to ten minutes straight sometime, and see how that feels.

There are many ways to cultivate compassion and lovingkindness, such as meditation and selfless acts which could also help release oxytocin, a hormone that is involved in warm feelings of safety and contentment -

Train Your Brain

This course teaches practical, down-to-earth ways to activate the brain states that promote: Steady Awareness, Wholesome Feelings, Good Intentions, Caring Heart, and Wise Action. It is taught in a 24-month cycle which you can enter at any time. Talks and materials from past class sessions are archived at www.WiseBrain.org.

The class meets on the 2nd Tuesday of every month, 7 - 9:15 pm, at the Unitarian Universalist church in Terra Linda (San Rafael), at 240 Channing Way. The atmosphere is warm, informal, and focused. The suggested fee for each month of the program is \$20 - \$40, but no one will be turned away for lack of funds. Please arrive ten to fifteen minutes early so you will have ample time to register for the class.

Upcoming dates and topics:

- 1/08/08 - From Shame to Worth

The social machinery of shame. The harsh and primitive inner critic. The distinction between healthy remorse and unfair guilt. Methods for releasing shame and guilt. Honest inventory of your own good qualities. Taking in acknowledgement.

- 2/12/08 - From Sadness to Contentment

Healthy mourning, grieving, and "the wound of the heart" - and unhealthy melancholy and depression.

- 3/11/08 - The Power of Intention

"Everything rests on the tip of motivation." Frontal lobe controls. Methods for clarity of purpose: verbal, imagistic, theatrical.

San Rafael Meditation Group

Open to beginners and experienced practitioners, we meet on Wednesday evenings at the A Sante day spa in downtown San Rafael. Meditation is available from 6:45, with the formal beginning (with brief instruction) at 7:00, ending at 7:30, with a dharma talk and discussion ending at 8:30. It is led by Rick Hanson, and for more information, contact him at drhh@comcast.net.

and is released in women when they are nursing, to give you a sense of its qualities.

Enjoy!

The Real Gift of Parenting

Here's a comment about the holiday season that I have heard from many parents – and I've sometimes felt much the same way myself:

Last year, the holidays were crazy! I seemed to spend most of my time standing in line or carrying bags. We spent a small fortune on assorted complicated gizmos -- which got opened and then ignored as my daughter and son spent most of the day playing with \$2.99 worth of stickers. We got stressed out in order to relax and suffered in order to have fun. My husband and I stared at each other across the flotsam and jetsam of wrapping paper and various pieces of who-knows-what, and you could see the look in each of our eyes: Say what?!

As you brave the holiday shopping crowds -- trying to decide whether to give Barbie or Big Bird, Legos or (good grief) an iPod -- or hassle with returns and sales in January, it's easy to feel a little overwhelmed, and distracted from the real gifts that are at the heart of parenting.

But happily, when you relax a bit and come back to yourself, the true gifts of parenting come back to

mind, the ones that go deeper than giving our kids toys and games -- or even a college education.

Over and over again, a hundred times each day, we freely offer a hug, a smile, a touch, a scolding, a sandwich, a paycheck earned, a story read, a bed tucked in, a goodnight kiss. So many things, so rapidly readily given that we hardly notice them -- but they are the fabric of family, new threads added many times each hour, warm and cozy and nurturing, the blanket of love in which we wrap our precious vulnerable beloved children.

We offer our lap when our back hurts, we offer our heart when it feels empty. We let our children enter our thoughts when our minds seem stuffed with grown-up



concerns and plans.

Our offerings are not just material or actions. We also offer restraint, wise not-doing. We let small things slide. We take into account a no-nap, hungry day . . . or a tough strike-out in Little League . . . or a major dump on our daughter by her best friend. We give the gift of self-control, of not swatting or yelling or overreacting - even when, yes, it would be a relief.

We let our children have us when we feel all too “had” by others. We give even when others haven’t given enough to us: our coworkers, our boss, our spouse, our own parents.

We give even when a part of ourselves may not want to; often the most meaningful giving to our children is offered when our personal preference would be to do something else.

We find more water when the wellspring seems to have run dry.

Most fundamentally, we give our selves.

We open the door wide; we give our children access to the vulnerable places in our heart; we let them enter our souls; we let them crawl oh so deeply under our skin.

Our children give us so much to be sure. The act of parenting has its own rewards. And we need to take care of ourselves so that we can continue to have something to give to our children.

But parents don’t give to get. And in the moment of giving to a child we often don’t get back much at all. Fundamentally, parenting is not an exchange: we are not playing let’s-make-a-deal with our children.

Parenting is an ongoing process of healthy sacrifice: the sacrifice of attention, time, energy, money, personal agendas, and all the activities we would prefer to do if we were not parenting.

Of course, we sacrifice not as martyrs but with our eyes open, freely, with strength, with all the ordinary little heroic acts that make up the daily life of a parent.

We sacrifice our individual selves into relationship with our children. We release for a moment the sense of contraction as an isolated self into the joining of love, a love that may feel for some as if it partakes of something that’s ultimately Divine.

Sacrifice means “sacred act.” During this seasonal time, of plunging into the dark to be renewed for the swelling of the light, a period that’s sacred in many cultures around the world -- it’s a lovely, self-nurturing thing to reflect a bit on what may be for you the sacred essence of parenting.

Grateful Wonder

OK, we admit it, you may want some Kleenex handy for these videos that touch on our themes this issue of gratitude and generosity:

- A phone salesman singing opera:
www.youtube.com/watch?v=1k08yxu57NA
- A young girl singing “Over the Rainbow”: www.youtube.com/watch?v=QWN0iVrJDsE&feature=related
- An autistic man singing The Star-Spangled Banner:
www.youtube.com/watch?v=NhcZRFcjbhw

Then, for a more cosmic perspective, here are websites for:

- Our “local” galactic neighborhood:
<http://antwrp.gsfc.nasa.gov/apod/ap071211.html>
- A multi-light-year nebula that looks like an ascending pair of angel’s wings:
<http://antwrp.gsfc.nasa.gov/apod/ap071215.html>

Words of Wisdom:

Gratitude and Generosity

compiled by Rick Hanson

*Resting at my open window I gaze out at mountains
a thousand peaks of blue and purple rise above the pines
without a thought or care white clouds come and go
so utterly accepting so totally relaxed*

Han-shan Te-ch'ing, d. 1623

*Those who dwell, as scientists or laymen, among the beauties
and mysteries of the earth, are never alone or weary of life.*

Rachel Carson

*Knowing life is short, enjoy it day after day, moment after
moment.*

Suzuki Roshi

PRAYING

*It doesn't have to be
The blue iris, it could be
Weeds in a vacant lot, or a few
Small stones, just*

Pay attention, then patch

*A few words together and don't try
To make them elaborate, this isn't
A contest but the doorway*

*Into thanks, and a silence in which
Another voice may speak.*

Mary Oliver, from *Thirst*

*We who lived in concentration camps can remember those who
walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their
last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but
they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a
person but one thing: the last of human freedoms – to choose
one's attitude in any given set of circumstances – to choose
one's own way.*

Viktor Frankl, Auschwitz survivor

*At this moment, we are just here. The breath goes in, the
breath goes out. That's what's happening. The rest is all our
mental commentaries and interpretations. Just bring the mind
back into the present. Let every-
thing else drop away. Don't give
any energy to it. Just be present
in the moment. . . . We must try to
develop the practice of giving ev-
erything we do our full attention.
. . . This is especially important
with the people we are close to. We
need to try to relate to them as if
we had never met them before – to
see them freshly in their genuine
potential instead of seeing this
hard mold we have pressed every-
body we know into. . . Every dish
you wash is a new dish.*

Ani Tenzin Palmo



Giving is Good:

Generosity from Everyday, Buddhist, and Evolutionary Perspectives

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Introduction

Giving - known as “dana” in Pali, the language in which the teachings of the Buddha were first written down – is the first of the ten “paramis” or perfections of a Bodhisattva, a highly Awakened person who postpones his or her ultimate enlightenment to bring all beings to liberation.

The other nine paramis are virtue (sila), renunciation (nekkhamma), discernment (pañña), energy/persistence (viriyā), patience/forbearance (khanti), truthfulness (sacca), determination (adhitthana), good will (metta), and equanimity (upekkha).

In their most complete expression, these are combined with compassion and skillfulness, and they are untainted by any kind of craving, self-centeredness, or positional views.

Of course, these qualities are present to some degree in us all. Even without being – or even aspiring to be – a Bodhisattva, it is a wonderful thing both to express these qualities as they already exist, and to cultivate them further in our mind and heart, in our thoughts and words and deeds.

You can read this article within a Buddhist framework or simply for its reflections on the deeply human, wide-

spread, and everyday matter of giving.

The Realm of Giving and Generosity

The specific meaning of dana is giving, which is related to the quality of “caga” (in Pali), or generosity. The one involves doing, while the other involves being.

While this distinction is useful in its comprehensiveness, in actuality generosity and giving, being and doing, are intertwined and inextricable. Being is itself a kind of doing, as you cannot help but radiate certain qualities out into the world. And every doing – at each endlessly disappearing and regenerating instant of NOW – is a microscopic slice of being.

Giving and generosity can be expressive or restrained. For example, we might give to our child or someone else we love fondness and affection (expressive), and we might also give the holding of our temper or our hand in anger (restrained).

The essence of generosity is that we give outside the framework of a tight, reciprocal exchange. Yes, we may give the coffee guy \$2.50 for a latte, and we may trade back rubs with our partner, but neither is particularly generous in its own right. On the other hand, tossing

the change from \$3 into the tip jar is indeed generous, as would be doing an extra great job on that back rub when it's your turn.

While dana often means something fairly narrow and specific – alms for a monk or nun, or donation to a teacher – in the broadest sense, we are generous and giving whenever we be or do in the territory these words point to:

- Serve
- Contribute
- Donate, grant, award, bestow, make a gift of, bequeath
- Praise, acknowledge
- Love, care, like
- Sacrifice, relinquish
- Devote, dedicate
- Be altruistic
- Forgive
- Forbear, restrain yourself for the sake of others

Let's consider some concrete examples; you give whenever you:

- Pat an arm in friendship, sympathy, or encouragement
- Put money – or a banana or chocolate – in the donation bowl
- Relax your position and open up to the viewpoint of another person
- Offer anything out upon the internet or in a newsletter, etc.
- Try to help someone
- Wave someone ahead of you in line
- Try to cheer someone up
- Make a gift
- Write a thank you note
- Love
- Listen patiently when you'd rather be doing something else
- Cultivate qualities in yourself that will benefit others
- Change a diaper – at either end of the lifespan



- Give some money to a homeless person
- Express gratitude or appreciation
- Vote
- Volunteer your time
- Tell somebody about something great

In particular, you are generous whenever you “give no man or woman cause to fear you” – in other words, when you live in a virtuous, moral way. In Buddhism, the Five Precepts are the common, practical guide to ethical conduct: do not kill, steal, lie, intoxicate yourself, or cause harm through your sexuality. Quoting Bhikkhu Bodhi, referring to the *Anguttara Nikaya*: “By [the meticulous observance of the Five Precepts], one gives fearlessness, love and benevolence to all beings. If one human being can give security and freedom from fear to others by his behavior, that is the highest form of *dana* one can give, not only to mankind, but to all living beings.”

Last, perhaps as an antidote to the too-common practice of treating those closest to us the worst of all, the Buddha stressed the importance of honoring and caring for one’s parents, one’s spouse and children, and one’s employees and dependents. For example, in one sutta (discourse), offering hospitality to one’s relatives is one of the great auspicious deeds a layperson can perform.

Giving Is the Most Natural Thing in the World

When you consider all this, it’s clear that we spend a lot of time giving to others. It’s the most natural thing in the world. Most giving is small, in passing, hardly noticed, the breath and wallpaper of life. It’s not hard to overlook. And with all the attention paid in the media to images and words of destruction and horrible mistreatment, it is easy to conclude that the true home of humanity is on the dark side of the force.

Yet, while it is certainly true that we are animals atop the food chain and capable of great aggressiveness, it is even more true that we are genetically programmed to be cooperative and generous. The defining feature of human society is cooperation; notwithstanding the daily weird killing on the 6 o’clock news, harmful aggression is the exception, not the rule: that’s why it’s news.

Consider these facts about human beings – in other words, you and me:

- We evolved from a rarity in the animal kingdom: species composed of groups of individuals that routinely shared food with each other, even when they weren’t related.
- Our ancestors were unusual among animals in another way as well, in that they cooperated to gather and hunt.
- A third distinctive feature of humans is that males of-



ten stay involved after children are conceived to protect and share food with them and their mother. While we might wish this were even more common, it's important to remember that in almost all animal species, fathers take zero interest in their young.

- Genetically, our nearest relative – the chimpanzee – has DNA that is about 98% similar to our own. That crucial 2% is largely directed at brain development, and the portions of the brain are especially affected have to do with language, expressing emotion and reading it in others, and planning – all at the heart of cooperative activity.
- Under stress, researchers have found that the fight-or-flight activations of the sympathetic nervous system are commonly channeled down “tend and befriend” channels for women. I haven't seen a study on this yet, but probably there are comparable “fix and huddle” channels for men (sorry about the lack of rhyming for guys . . .).
- Exotic game theory analyses have shown what's evident in hunter-gatherer cultures, at the UN, and on the playground of the local elementary school: that there is

an evolutionary advantage in being a trustworthy cooperative partner, one who gives at least as much as he or she receives. In particular, studies have shown that in an intensely harsh natural environment – such as was present on the plains of Africa – groups that have members who are willing to sacrifice themselves for the good of the group will over time come to dominate other groups that lack such altruistic and generous members.

- To quote Robert Sapolsky (Foreign Affairs, January/February, 2006): “Across the roughly 150 or so primate species, the larger the average social group, the larger the cortex [the portion responsible for higher order reasoning, communication, and social judgment] relative to the rest of the brain.”

In sum, over three or four million years, the groups of hominid ancestors that developed giving, generosity, and cooperation to a fine art were the ones that survived to pass down the genes that are our endowment today. As a result, we are “born and bred” to want to give, to contribute, to make a difference.



One way to see the centrality of that impulse in the human experience is to observe what happens when it's thwarted:

- On the job, even well-paid workers who feel they lack ways to contribute and add value have much less job satisfaction.
- In mid-life, when the developmental task of what Erik Erikson called “generativity” (versus “stagnation”) is not fulfilled, depression and a sense of aimlessness are the result.
- In adolescence today, getting shunted off to quasi-reservations of high schools and malls – away from the world of adult work

The Heartwood Institute
For Neuroscience and Contemplative Wisdom

The Institute is a 501c3 non-profit corporation, and it publishes the Wise Brain Bulletin. The 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/Heartwood.html.

that was the natural province of teenagers throughout most human history – breeds a sense of alienation and irrelevance that in turn fosters poor motivation and a predilection for drugs and other risky behaviors. One reason so many adolescents are angry is that there's no way for them to be useful.

Generosity and Giving in Buddhist Practice

Generosity and giving were usually the first things the Buddha discussed with people encountering his teachings for the first time. It's that fundamental.

Giving is the foundation of the gradual training of the mind and heart that led to less suffering and, ultimately, to enlightenment. To paraphrase Bhikkhu Bodhi on the Access to Insight website: "The goal of that path is the destruction of greed, hate and delusion, and the cultivation of generosity directly debilitates greed and hate, while facilitating that pliancy of mind that allows for the eradication of delusion."

As a result, giving or generosity is one of the three bases of meritorious deeds, the first of the four means of benefiting others, and (as noted) the first of the ten "perfections." Generosity is also included among the essential attributes of the good or superior person, along with faith, morality, learning and wisdom.

In keeping with the central role of motivation in determining the effects – the karmas – of an action (of thought, word, or deed), the discourses of the Buddha emphasize the importance of the giver's intentions before, during and after the act of generosity.

Again, to quote Bhikkhu Bodhi: "Generosity associated with wisdom before, during and after the act is the highest type of giving. Three examples of wise giving are: giving with the clear understanding that according to the kammic law of cause and effect, the generous act will bring beneficial results in the future; giving while aware that the gift, the recipient and the giver are all impermanent; and giving with the aim of enhancing one's efforts to become enlightened."

The Benefits of Giving

Consider these benefits of giving:

- It feels good in its own right.
- It's enlightened self-interest. As noted above, fair-play and cooperation build up a reputation that is advantageous over time; become known as a miserly stiff-arm artist, and you may as well leave town.
- As noted just above, in Buddhism, giving embodies the practice of non-attachment and is an antidote to greed, one of the "three poisons" (in addition to hatred and delusion). The Buddha said that if people knew the value of giving, they would not take a single meal without sharing their food with others.
- Giving also opens the clenched fist of self-contraction

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.

into the open hand of generosity. We release self – a prime engine of suffering – when we give from the heart.

- Generosity, especially with our possessions, carries the lesson that at the boundary markers of life – birth and death – we come in with nothing and we can take nothing with us.

As Karl Menninger put it: “Love cures – both the ones who give it and the ones who receive it.”

Challenges to Generosity

Inhospitable Conditions

Sometimes it’s actually not safe to be giving and generous. For example, it could be risky to pick up an unsavory hitchhiker, or loan a friend a lot of money who never pays it back, or be open with how you really feel with someone who you know will use it against you.



In some settings – such as many high schools – being open-handed and generous exposes you to ridicule and sneering doubts about your true motives.

Or it could simply be clear that giving will most likely be a waste of time. Maybe there’s just no point in offering yet again your truly wise counsel to an aging parent who never listens. Or in giving your neat idea for a fundraising project to a non-profit whose board is tied up in knots. Or loaning your table saw to a neighbor who broke the last one you had.

In cases like these, a prudent person conserves his or her resources for more opportune moments. Cast your seeds where they are likely to take root and flourish; don’t try to plant roses in a parking lot.

Fear

But more often than not, the real challenges to giving lie inside our own heart. Often we hoard our energy and time and money for some kind of last battle that never comes, afraid that if we give we’ll give out, running on empty at the end of our days. Or we are afraid that if we give our all, then we’ll have no face-saving excuse for it not being successful. Or we are nervous about wearing our heart on our sleeve and revealing what we really care about.

These fears should be considered guilty until proven innocent. Test them in small, safe experiments to see if they are actually true. When (typically) you discover they’re bogus, push them aside. Even if they’re true in some small way, evaluate that cost in light of the (usually) greater benefits of being generous.

American Culture

In many parts of the world, people believe that the best way to achieve security for themselves is through alliances with others that require a certain openness to giving and generosity. But in America, there is a longstanding belief that secu-

rity is attained through amassing personal resources: to put it very bluntly, through owning the biggest possible pile of gold and guns. While Americans certainly give generously to charities and other good causes, there is undoubtedly a cynical strain of “look our for #1 and don’t be a chump” woven throughout our culture.

The way to deal with the background noise of culture – insidious because it slips so quietly through our filters – is by being mindful of it and bringing it into conscious awareness. Notice how rare it is to see an act of sincere – not ironic or tactical – generosity in TV shows or in commercials. Try to flag counter-examples, both in media and in your personal life, where giving turns out well. Reflect on what you’ve seen yourself or heard about, regarding the everyday generosity of people in other countries; for example, a well-traveled friend once casually observed: “I’ve seen most of the world, and it’s interesting that the happiest people are usually the poorest ones.” And, if you like, consciously take a stand in your own mind for the cultural values you want to be your own.

Ego. I and Mine.

As soon as we separate “me” from “you,” or “us” from “them,” we instantly make a distinction between the good things on our own side of the line, and feel there is inherently a loss if any of those good things were to slide over to the other side – where “they” are.

Unfortunately, this separation, this dualism, is hard-wired in our brain since a fundamental biological requirement for the survival of any organism is to distinguish between what’s inside its skin from what’s outside.

But try to observe how me-ness constrains and distorts your natural impulses to give.

That observing will tend to take you directly to opening your heart and hand.

Practices of Giving

Open your heart. Just that.

Take in the pleasures of generosity so that “gladness of heart” motivates you, as the Buddha suggested, toward more generosity in the future.

Identify forms of giving you naturally, effortlessly enjoy, and do more of those.

Decouple working from its results, so the effort, the activity itself is a practice of generous giving.

Tithe, giving a specific percentage of your net income to charitable causes.

Stretch yourself. Give a little more than you planned and see how that feels.

As a focused experiment, push through a specific fear about giving and see what happens.

Deliberately pick a habit of withholding or stinginess, and for a day or week or year, do the opposite.

Address your innermost thoughts. Are they generous? Generous in forgiveness? In praise of others? In understanding, compassion? Or are they judgmental, snippy, denigrating, withholding, and fearful?

Conclusion

With its focus on giving, this time of year is a wonderful opportunity to explore and experience the blessings of generosity.

May your generosity serve you and all beings!

Offerings

Rick Hanson, PhD, and Rick Mendius, MD

1. On Saturday and Sunday, February 23 and 24, Rick Hanson will be leading an experiential and powerful personal growth workshop called Being Your Best Self. Deep within each one of us, grounded in the structures of the brain, is a core of being that is courageous, caring, and contented – and this workshop is about removing blocks to living from that core, and about energizing it in your relationships and in your work. We'll be sending out more detailed information about this workshop in early January.

2. At Spirit Rock, in 2008, these daylongs are scheduled:

- The Neurodharma of Love, led with Sylvia Boorstein, on Sunday, March 30. Sylvia, as you may know, is quite extraordinary – sort of a cross between a Jewish grandmother and the Dalai Lama – and this workshop will be memorable. 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.”

- Equanimity, led with Christina Feldman, on Sunday, May 11. Christina is a senior Vipassana teacher from England who combines profound penetration with practical good humor. Equanimity is the key to freedom from emotional reactions, and to cutting the chain of craving and clinging that leads to suffering.

- The Neurology of Awakening, on Saturday, September 6. 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.

- Resting in Emptiness, on Sunday, November 9. 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.

3. At One Taste in San Francisco – an organization and living collective dedicated to conscious and embodied relationships – on Tuesday evening, April 15, we will be giving a public talk on the evolution – and transcendence – of jealousy. It should be a fun, playful, and informative event.

4. At Claremont Graduate University, during October 19 – 21, we will be discussants at a conference on using neuropsychology to help illuminate the common ground – and differences – among the contemplative practices of different faith traditions.

Fare Well

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