

# The Wise Brain Bulletin

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

## ***The Brain in Lust and Love:***

***The Evolution of Empathy, Cooperation, and Caring –  
And Graceful Ways to Ride the Roller-Coaster of Romance***

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Rick Mendius, MD, 2008

### ***Introduction***

The marvelous human capabilities for understanding each other, and feeling understood, developed in the brain over millions of years.

Learning about these can help you understand and work better with your own empathic capabilities.

And they point to a hard-wired tendency in the human character – a kind of Dark Side of the Force – that must be managed, even transcended, for the full flowering of virtue, compassion, empathy, kindness, and love.

### ***Building Blocks of Empathy***

Organisms develop attributes through evolution because those characteristics function to increase . . . grandchildren.

Evolution builds complex capabilities out of simpler ones.

These are the five major building blocks of empathy that increased the grandchildren – ultimately, us – of our

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## 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.

The Bulletin is offered freely, and you are welcome to share it with others. Past issues are archived at [www.WiseBrain.org](http://www.WiseBrain.org).

Rick Hanson, PhD and Richard Mendius, MD edit the Bulletin, and it's designed and laid out by Laurel Hanson. To subscribe, please contact Rick at [drh@comcast.net](mailto:drh@comcast.net).

ancient, great- great great primate, mammal, and reptile ancestor-parents:

1. Understanding the intentions of other animals, both of one's own species, and others.

For example, consider the basic distinction between: Do you want to mate with me? Or eat me? (Or both . . . But hopefully, we've moved beyond the black widow spider level . . .)

Even quite primitive animals work to infer the true plans of

other animals from the behavior of those other animals.

2. Simulation systems – Many of the same neural circuits activate both when we take an action and when see others taking the same action.

Since the brains of normal humans are 99.9% identical to each other in their core functionalities – since they are derived from the same basic template in human DNA – this means that the general experience of an action within me – let's say, of reaching for a cup – is close to, or shares features with, the experience of that action within you.

In terms of motor activities, when I see you reaching for a cup, neural circuits (called "mirror neurons") within me create a simulation – a kind of echo – of the actual felt experience within you of reaching for that cup.

Similarly, many of the same neural circuits activate when we experience primary emotions and when we see others experiencing the same emotion. For example, the insula activates both when you are having a gut feeling – such as fear of pain, disgust,

or nausea – and when you see someone having a similar gut feeling (particularly someone you care about).

Literally, you really do feel my pain.

And more broadly, many of the same neural circuits activate when we have more subtle emotions and when we see others having that same emotion. As a result, impairments in the production of emotions – such as with strokes in certain parts of the brain – lead to impairments in the recognition of those emotions.

These activations are hard-wired and occur automatically, often outside of awareness.

In other words, there is a kind of natural, unbidden resonance in which our brains are continually re-creating within ourselves traces of the experience of other people.

3. Empathy facilitates cooperation and altruism. We come from a long line of social animals, and within groups where others know what you're up to – where your reputation can be known – there are reproductive advantages in being seen as a cooperative, giving individual.



Further, groups characterized by a high level of cooperation and altruism among their members had advantages compared to other groups in which cooperation and altruism was low. In other words, all things being equal, groups with strong teamwork will beat groups with weak teamwork.

Even sometimes, groups with individually weaker members – but who unselfishly work together for the greater good – will often beat groups with individually stronger members but less teamwork . . . as one can often see in professional sports, especially those that really rely on teamwork, such as basketball.

And the accumulating advantages of that difference – the degree of teamwork – really mount up in harsh environmental conditions. Which are precisely the conditions in which our primate and mammalian ancestors evolved (and the NBA playoffs!).

4. Language offers a rich medium of communication that helps us describe inner states more fully and more clearly. Humans, unlike other animals, can put their feelings into words. Consider the nuances available in some of the words we use for flavors of fear: unease, worry, apprehensiveness, anxiety, dread, panic, terror.

5. Last, with language came increasing abilities at conceptualization, or abstract thought. This aided empathy in two key ways:

- It enabled us to stand outside our own point of view in order to consider the point of view of the other person.

We need a basic mental flexibility to be empathic.

Consider people who tend toward a certain mental rigidity – hmm, probably a few of us here in this room! – and how they tend to have limited empathy.



## ***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](http://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:

- 5/13/08 – Tending to the Causes

“Wise View” about what leads to good results in life, and what does not. “Fearless inventory” of improving your purposes and plans in life. Creating sanctuary in the brain and mind for wholesome intentions.

- 6/10/08 – Empathy

Attunement: synchronizing two brains. Mirror neurons. Deepening tolerance of being with another. Giving attention over; “the bodily sacrifice of attention.” Looking beneath the surface. Accepting complexity, ambivalence, and conflict in others – and yourself.

- 7/8/08 – Feeling felt

Tolerating closeness. Dealing with past feelings of invasion, violation, intrusive control, “Trojan horses” of manipulative seductions, etc. HeartMath methods for calming and opening the heart, literally and figuratively. Feeling strong enough to rely on others.

(Which is another good reason to develop the ability to step back and observe and reflect upon our own mental processes – which is, in Buddhist practice, called the Third Foundation of Mindfulness.)

- It enabled us to make educated guesses – to make inferences – about what’s going on inside the other person.

More primal sensate and emotional mirroring systems give us lots of data, and then we step back and reason about it, creating hypotheses, and checking them out to produce more data, and so on.

Empathy has an intelligence to it. It is much more than simple mirroring of or resonance with the other person. Empathy is inquiry. Which is an aspect of the investigation factor, which is one of the seven factors of enlightenment in Buddhist thinking.

Interestingly, these more conceptual aspects of empathy come fully on line relatively late in human development – in adolescence or even early adulthood – much as they have come on late only recently in primate evolution

In sum, 2.5 million years ago, our great- great-grandparents were making stone tools in Africa. And handing down that technology to generation after generation – sometimes unchanged for a million years. Pretty incredible!

But those folks had brains about half the size of our own. The other half that got added since then, mainly handles language and conceptualization, and related abilities with planning, emotion, and social behavior.

That’s the difference – less than three cups worth – that has made all the difference in the world.

### ***Evolution of Bonding and Love***

Then, building on these omnidirectional capacities for cooperation, empathy, and altruism, we have the evolution of pair bonding, culminating in the complexities of human love.

What was the payoff in the “reproductive advantages” of pair bonding – between parents and their young, and between mates – that drive evolution?



Humans evolved bonding in large part because childhood is so long – and childhood is so long in order to develop



all the faculties of the higher brain functions.

So we needed ways to bond mothers with children for years and years, and ways to bond fathers with children and their mothers for years and years, and ways to bond family groups together for years and years in order to sustain “the village it takes to raise a child.”

Many factors promote bonding, including virtue and empathy – the capacities for which have certainly evolved over time.

Biochemical factors have evolved as well, and let’s consider two of them now: the chemicals dopamine and oxytocin. Both are neurotransmitters in the brain, and oxytocin also functions as a hormone when it acts outside the nervous system.

(By the way, dopamine and oxytocin, like many other biochemical factors, are present in other mammals, too, but as with most things human, their effects are much more nuanced and elaborated.)

## **Dopamine**

It’s an error to reduce love to chemicals, since so many other factors are at work in the brain and mind as well,

so let’s hold this material in perspective.

That said, it appears that when people are in love, among other neurological activity, two parts of their brain really get activated.

Both of these areas are shown in the MRI slide just to the left. It’s a sideways slice of the brain, looking down. The white blob in the middle is actually two little – but very important – parts of the brain that are both very active. They are called the tegmentum and the caudate nucleus.

What’s happening in the picture – taken of a college student in love while looking at a picture of his or her beloved – is that portions of the tegmentum are flooding the caudate with lots of dopamine.

The caudate really “likes” dopamine, so it sends signals back to the tegmentum to keep the supplies coming.

Dopamine is very involved with pleasure and motivation. And also addiction; cocaine triggers lots of dopamine.

In effect, being in love rewards the pleasure centers in your brain, which then crave whatever it was that was so rewarding – in other words, your beloved.

And being rejected in love activates a part of the brain called the insula, which is the same region that lights up when we are in physical pain (as noted above).

So we are doubly motivated to hold fast to the object of our love: feel the pleasure, and avoid the pain.

Interestingly, when people are in lust, rather than in love, different systems of the brain get activated, notably the hypothalamus and the amygdala.

The hypothalamus regulates drives like hunger and thirst; interestingly, the word in Pali that is translated in English as the “desire” or “attachment” or “clinging” that is the root of suffering has the fundamental meaning of “thirst,” so it’s pretty likely that the hypothalamus is



involved in much of the clinging that leads to suffering.

The amygdala handles emotional reactivity, and both it and the hypothalamus are involved in arousal of the organism, readiness for action (and thus the amygdala and hypothalamus are central switchboards for the fight or flight responses to stress).

This speaks to the subjective experience of being in love, which generally feels softer, more “Aaaaahh, how sweet!” rather than the “Rawwrh, gotta have it!” intensity of lust.

That said, dopamine – increased in love – triggers testosterone production, which is a major factor in the sex drive of both men and women.

So, in short, we fall in love, and among other neural circuits and psychological complexities, the same reward chemicals involved in drug addiction lead us to crave our beloved and want sex with him or her. Sorry to be mechanistic here, but you get the idea.

The intended result, in the evolutionary playbook, is, of course, babies.

Then what?!

## Oxytocin

Oxytocin promotes bonding between mothers and children, and between mates, so they work together to keep those kids alive.

### **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 at the corner of Brooks and 3rd. “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](http://www.WiseBrain.org/sanrafaelmeditation.html). Newcomers are always welcome!

(By the way, we’d really like to credit Linda Graham, our friend and a great therapist and a writer for providing much of the information here about oxytocin. Thank you!)

For example, in women, oxytocin triggers the let-down reflex in nursing, and is involved in that blissful, oceanic feeling of peace and comfort and love experienced by many women while breastfeeding. (Of course, breastfeeding is often not so blissful!)

It also seems to be part of the female response to stress (more than in men – since women have much more oxytocin than men do), particularly encouraging what Shelley Taylor at UCLA called “tend-and-befriend” behaviors in women when they are stressed.

(Of course, men, too, will often reach out to others and be friendly during tough times, whether it’s crunch quarter at the office, or somewhere in a dusty war – another example of how there are many pathways in the brain to important functional results.)

The experiential qualities of oxytocin are pleasurable feelings of relaxation and rightness, so it is an internal reward for all bonding behaviors – not just with mates.

Oxytocin encourages sociability; for example, when oxytocin capabilities are knocked out in laboratory mice, their relationships with other mice are very disturbed.

And oxytocin dampens the stress response of the sympathetic nervous system and the hypothalamus-pituitary-adrenal axis – besides having functional benefits, this is another pathway for rewarding, and thus encouraging, bonding behaviors.

What triggers this warm and fuzzy and let’s-get-together-now chemical?

Oxytocin is released in both women and men:

- When nipples are stimulated (such as through nursing)

- During orgasm, promoting the afterglow of warm affection (and a tendency, sometimes annoying in a partner, to fall asleep!)
- During extended, physical, especially “skin-to-skin” contact (e.g., cuddling children, long hugs with friends, teens forming packs on the couch, lovers caressing after sex)
- When moving together harmoniously, like dancing
- When there are warm feelings of rapport or love; a strong sense of metta (lovingkindness) probably entails releases of oxytocin, though we have not seen a study on that specific subject (a great Ph.D. dissertation for someone).
- Probably during devotional experiences, such as in prayer, or while with certain kinds of spiritual teachers

Oxytocin can also be released just by imagining – the more vividly, the better – the activities just mentioned, particularly when combined with warm feelings.

Of course, to reiterate, oxytocin is just one of many factors at work in our relationships. For example, philosophical values or ideals of universal compassion, such as in the major religions of the world, can also influence a person’s behavior greatly, whether or not any oxytocin is released.

## ***The Dark Side Of Romantic Bonding***

For all their wonderful aspects, the neuropsychological mechanisms of bonding have their shadow sides, too. Let’s consider two of those.

The rewards of mating – so effective in getting people to make babies, and then stay joined to each other long enough to raise those children to semi-independent functionality – contain the seeds of two common problems:

- Those rewards – including sweet surges of dopamine

and oxytocin – naturally incline the mind to seek whatever will trigger those rewards . . . even if that’s not so good for us, or others. So we keep chasing the wrong person, looking for love in all the wrong places.

- Those pleasures also make us suffer when we lose them, if the other person distances or abandons us. Recall how rejection or abandonment activates some of the regions also triggered by physical pain. Rejection and abandonment hurt.

There are many toolboxes for dealing with these issues. Let’s consider the methods from Buddhism, for example.

The Buddha’s general analysis of the two problems just above – reduced to their essence, which is that unhealthy attachment leads to emotional pain – can be seen in what he called the Chain of Dependent Origination: contact with a stimulus [the beloved person] has a feeling tone [pleasant] which leads to craving, which leads to clinging, which leads to suffering.

To deal with this chain of one thing leading to another, Buddhism has many tools, and we will highlight two here – insight and equanimity – applied to romantic love and heartbreak.

As we explore insight and equanimity, you might like to keep applying these ideas to a specific love relationship – current or in the past – which will make them more real for you.

## **Insight**

Insight, or Wise View, helps us remember that letting ourselves crave a pleasure is the slippery slope to suffering . . . and if we’re clinging to that pleasure, we’ve fallen over the edge and it’s usually just a matter of time before we hit the ground.

It also helps us see the nature of the person, or the experiences, we crave: insight reminds us that they are all impermanent. They are bound to change. If we are not prepared for the person to change, or for the experiences with them to change, or for the relationship to change, or

for ourselves to change within the relationship . . . then we will suffer, and usually cause suffering as well.

Insight also helps us move to the wisdom place of disenchantment. We start to recognize that the pleasures of being with another person are nice – but rarely incredible. Nothing can be that great that long!

The stories told in novels and movies about the Fairy Prince or Princess and living happily forever after are just spells cast over the mind.

Love and long-term relationships and families are great, but it's wise to keep their rewards in perspective. If we are clear-eyed about what is actually possible over the long haul in love, we will tend to feel more relaxed in the relationship, more accepting of inevitable ups and downs, and be easier to live with . . . and to keep loving!

## Equanimity

Equanimity is more profound than calm.

When we are calm, we are not upset. When we are in a state of equanimity, even if our mind has gotten reactivated, we are not upset about the disturbance of mind.

In the Buddhist understanding of equanimity, to be a little technical, we are not reacting to the moment to moment feeling tone of experience, whether it is pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral.

It is hard to control the feeling tone in the moment – and in a way, wisdom realizes that this world, sometimes called samsara, is not perfectible, and will always have lots of neutral and pleasant experiences – so the best bet is to develop a wise response to that feeling tone . . . which is equanimity.

Applying this approach to the pleasures of mating, equanimity means to enjoy what is pleasant without chasing after it. Letting physical pleasures of mating flow through . . . letting the emotional rewards of closeness flow through . . . enjoying them, but not

grasping them.

Similarly, equanimity with the unpleasant means being present with it, but not adding insult to injury – what the Buddha called the second dart – by getting frightened, or agitated, or losing touch with virtue and empathy and lashing out. Or feeling affronted – suffering what in psychology lingo is a “narcissistic wound,” clinging to self – in how could you treat me this way?!

And when the feeling tone is neutral – as it really is so much of the time, both in life in general and in our relationships – equanimity stays relaxed with the neutral and doesn't need it to jump up and get great again. For example, lots of time we get frightened that nothing is happening in the relationship, and stir things up needlessly, to get some stimulation going.

The result of equanimity with the neutral is patience and ease of mind for yourself, and for others, it makes you a person who is a lot easier to be with.

Daily life in a bonded relationship, or daily life without a bonded relationship but wanting one, is full of opportunities to practice with insight and equanimity. Since “neurons that fire together, wire together,” that regular practice will cultivate greater insight and equanimity in you.

Additionally, no surprise, meditation is a direct path to insight and equanimity, and we encourage you to commit to meditating every day, at least one minute or more. Meditation is to mental health what aerobic exercise is to physical health.

In sum, to refer to perhaps the greatest dharma story of all time – Goldilocks and the Three Bears! – romantic love goes best when we're in the “just-right” spot of not too cold and not too hot: brave enough to give our hearts, and wise enough to not get over-clinging about whatever results.

The practices of virtue, empathy, insight, and equanimity can really help us find and stay in that just-right place.



# Words of Wisdom

*When a thing is new, people say: "It is not true." Later, when its truth becomes obvious, they say: "It is not important."*

*Finally, when its importance cannot be denied, they say: "Any- way, it is not new."*

- William James

*The greatest discovery of any generation is that a human being can alter his life by altering his attitude.*

- William James

*You live in illusion and the appearance of things. There is a reality, but you do not know this. When you understand this, you will see that you are nothing. And being nothing, you are everything. That is all.*

- Kalu Rinpoche

*In this world . . . there are three things*

*[of value] for one who gives.*

*What are these three things?*

*Before giving, the mind of the giver is happy.  
While giving, the mind of the giver is made peaceful.  
After having given, the mind of the giver is uplifted.*

- The Buddha (Anguttara Nikaya 3.6.37)

*One of the instructions I've loved offering to people over the past decade or two is to suggest that they do a year of lovingkindness for themselves as a practice.*

- Jack Kornfield

*Love says: "I am everything." Wisdom says: "I am nothing." Between the two my life flows.*

- Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj

## How to Build a Stronger Community

*Turn off your TV. Leave your house. Know your neighbors. Greet people. Look up when you are walking. Sit on your stoop.*

*Plant flowers. Use your library.*

*Play together. Buy from local merchants. Share what you have.*

*Help a lost dog. Take children to the park.*

*Honor elders. Support neighborhood schools. Fix it even if you didn't break it.*

*Have pot lucks. Garden together. Pick up litter.*

*Read stories aloud. Dance in the street.*

*Talk to the mail carrier. Listen to the birds.*

*Put up a swing. Help carry something heavy. Barter your goods. Start a tradition.*

*Ask a question. Hire young people for odd jobs.*

*Organize a block party. Bake extra and share.*

*Ask for help when you need it. Open your shades.*

*Sing together. Share your skills. Take Back the Night. Turn up the music.*

*Turn down the music. Listen before you react to anger. Mediate a conflict.*

*Seek to understand. Learn from new and uncomfortable angles.*

*Know that no one is silent*

*Though many are not heard. Work to change this.*

- from [www.ActiveNeighboring.org](http://www.ActiveNeighboring.org)



# *Metta for the Whole World:*

## *A Meditative Reflection*

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### ***I*n**tr***o***duction

“Metta” means lovingkindness. A beautiful way to compensate for the hard-wired tendency to fix our attention and affections on mainly one person, or small group of people, is to deliberately cultivate and practice an attitude of compassion and kindness toward people in general.

### ***A*** Reflection

Finding a posture that helps you remain both alert and relaxed.

Settling into the breath.

Going with the feelings that seem right to you, staying with the suggestions here or following your own direction.

Sensing the sensations of the breath in the chest, in the region of the heart.

Bringing to mind the feeling of being with someone you care about deeply. Someone you love.

Feeling that love.

Perhaps sensing that love flowing through the heart, perhaps in a rhythm with the breath.

Perhaps a sense of that love as having a life of its own, flowing through your heart, not specific to any one person.

That love becoming more global, a broad sense of goodwill and kindness toward the people you know well, your immediate friends and family.

Perhaps a sense of that lovingkindness flowing through your heart in rhythm with the breath.

That lovingkindness extending further outward toward the many people you know who are pretty neutral to you . . . perhaps people you see sometimes at the store, or at work, or connected with people you know well . . . wishing them the best, too . . . that they suffer less . . . that they are truly happy . . .

Perhaps a sense of the lovingkindness like a warmth or light shining outward through you . . . or like a spreading pool like water, lapping outward ever farther, gentle waves extending outward to include ever more people.

Lovingkindness including even difficult people . . . lovingkindness with a life and strength of its own . . . that recognizes some of the many causes that affected those people and led them to be a problem for you . . . lovingkindness that wishes well to even people who have mistreated you . . . lovingkindness that wishes that even they may suffer less . . . lovingkindness that they, too, may be truly happy . . .

The peacefulness and strength of this lovingkindness flowing outward ever farther to include people you know exist, though you do not know them personally . . . lovingkindness for all the people living in America today, whether you agree with them or not, whether you like

them or not . . . .

Taking a couple minutes here on your own, to explore extending your lovingkindness to each one of the billions of people living here on Earth . . .

Someone somewhere right now laughing . . . someone crying . . . someone getting married . . . someone caring for a sick child or parent . . . someone worried . . . someone being born . . . someone dying . . . .

Lovingkindness flowing, extending out, comfortable and flowing, perhaps in rhythm with the breath . . . Lovingkindness extending to all living beings on this Earth . .

. Wishing them all well . . . All animals of all kinds, in the sea, on the earth, in the air . . . May they suffer less and find more comfort . . . All plants of all kinds . . . All microorganisms of all kinds, the amoebas, the bacteria, even the viruses . . . May they all suffer less, and find more comfort . . .

So that all cubs are our own . . .

So that all beings are our clan . . .

All life, our relatives . . .

The whole earth, our home . . .

## ***Balancing Joining and Separation***

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Rick Mendius, MD, 2008

### ***I*ntroduction**

There is a natural balance within us all between the desire for joining and the desire for separation, between the desire for closeness and the desire for distance.

These two great themes – joining and separation – are central to human life. Almost everyone wants both of them, to varying degrees.

People tend to focus a lot on the joining theme, both because relationships are about – uh – joining, and because spiritual practice of any kind is fundamentally about coming into relationship with things.

Into relationship with our own suffering and that of others, and into relationship with the real causes of that suffering. Into relationship with the endlessly changing and thus impermanent nature of existence and experi-

ence. Into mindful relationship with the body, with the sense of experience being pleasant or unpleasant or neutral, with all the thoughts and feelings etc, in the mind, and with the qualities and aims of consciousness itself. And – it's meaningful to you – into relationship with a transcendental Something: God, Buddhanature, the Infinite, unbounded Awareness . . . by whatever name.

But as important as relationship is, it is also important to bow to the other great theme, separation.

### ***T*he Benefits of Separation**

First, a healthy capacity for separation – or, using other words, for differentiation, individuation, autonomy, and self-expression – is a necessary (though not sufficient) condition for healthy joining. As the saying goes: fences make for good neighbors.

## From Our Contributors

### NO SELF

Last Thursday  
I discovered that  
I had no  
self.

I looked all around  
but I couldn't  
find it-  
anywhere!

I looked everywhere!

I thought I found it  
inside my head  
when I was  
talking  
but  
it was just my mouth  
making noise.

I thought I caught it hiding  
in my toe when I  
stubbed it  
but  
my foot said,  
"No, it's not here."

I looked  
"inside my heart,"  
but  
it wasn't there either-  
just an old pump  
and some tubing.

Second, autonomy is necessary for spiritual practice. Let's consider these examples from Buddhism:

Much as separation supports joining, experiences of healthy connection, particularly in childhood, are critical for the development of healthy self structures, ego functions, and sense of worth and confidence. By taking refuge in our feelings of connection – both present in our relationships of the moment as well as internalized from our history of relationships – we are able to move out, from a secure base, to explore and cope with the world as an individual.

For instance, in Buddhism, one of what are called the Three Jewels of practice is the Refuge of Sangha –

• One is always to "see for yourself," and make your own decisions about what makes sense to you in the teachings of the Buddha.

• It is fundamentally up to oneself, and no one else, to engage the path of practice. No one can make us do it; we have to choose it ourselves. While Buddhism does not speak against God, it does not assert that God shapes our lives and that God's grace is at work in our transformation.

• We are each individually responsible for the effects of our actions – for our own karmas. Buddhism is a very gentle religion/philosophy/whatever-it-is, but it is also bluntly tough-minded.

which means the community of fellow practitioners.

## Mutual Support

In other words: individuality and relationship, autonomy and intimacy, separation and joining support each other. They are often seen at odds with each other, but this is so not the case!

For example, by knowing that you are entitled to your own view of reality, that you can assert yourself appropriately, that you can disengage when you need to, that you can honor your temperament if you happen to be an introvert who is a little drained by contact and fed by solitude – then you can be more comfortable and willing to enter into the depths of joining and intimacy available in relationships, plus receive the supplies anyone needs for healthy individuation, including the attention and caring and esteem of others.

Similarly, by acknowledging, and normalizing, and respecting the need for separation and distance in others – even if it is sometimes not your preference – that helps create a zone of safety which often fosters a greater willingness to hang out for a while with closeness.

In fact, people often step back in relationships – like agreeing, perhaps tacitly, to just not talk about certain contentious topics – in order to stay close. In developmental psychology, the term is "distance in the service of attachment."

Then I  
knew I had it cornered  
in my mind  
but  
my thoughts just  
kept changing  
and  
changing.

It must have  
escaped in the  
confusion.

Now  
I know  
(at least I'm pretty sure)  
I must have had a self  
when I came here!

Maybe  
someone took it when  
I wasn't looking.

Maybe  
I  
lost it.

All I know  
Is  
it's not here now.

If you ask  
Me  
it's a mystery!

How's a guy  
supposed to get by  
with  
No  
Self?

Bruce Silver

**The Heartwood Institute**  
**For Neuroscience and Contemplative Wisdom**

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**Working out Different  
Desires for Closeness**

Of course, in important relationships there is rarely a perfect symmetry of desires for joining and separation. That just means that it is important to be alert to the other person's hot buttons: for many people, if they feel their autonomy is being challenged, then that pops to the top of the stack as the key issue on the table for them . . . while for many other people, the same is true regarding perceived threats to joining. By taking into account the "imperative" of the other person, you can skillfully prevent unnecessary conflicts; by explaining your own imperatives in relationships, you can help the other person understand you better.

Additionally, the natural differences between people in the priorities they give to joining compared to separation, and the differences in the ways in which they pursue those aims, are simply another thing – albeit an important one – to negotiate in relationships.

Being able to accept and own your personal joining/separation "thermostat setting" will help you to talk about it more straightforwardly and effectively with others. And you will be as able as possible to accept and work nimbly with that set point in others.

**Natural Cautions about Closeness**

Most psychological wounds or traumas occur in the context of relationships, including in early childhood. Further, in our evolutionary history, there were a lot of risks in encounters with people who were "not-my-tribe." So it is natural to be a little leery of interacting at first, especially with relative strangers.

To enter into connections today with other flesh-and-blood people, and with your internal history and sense

of relationships, it is skillful to be sensitive and caring toward your own alarm bells and nervousness and resistance.

It is natural to bump into those "defenses," often subtly. It is inevitable if you are opening up, becoming more available for relationship, more accessible, more engaged, more heartfelt, more loving.

Even as you read those words, you might be aware of both the longing for those qualities in your relationships and a certain . . . squeamishness perhaps? reluctance? anxiety? repulsion?!! . . . coming up as well.

It is perfectly natural. The closer we get, often the more the impulse to distance arises – just like the more distance we get, often the more the impulse to move closer arises.

As you go through life, first and foremost, just try to bring mindfulness to these states of mind, both the longing for closeness and the desire for distance. They are a wonderful object of mindfulness and even investigation.

In accord with true mindfulness, try to maintain an accepting interest, even a kind of soft friendliness, toward the closeness and toward the distancing.

And really, if the instinct toward stepping back feels wise, or is simply too strong to push through, then please by all means follow it, and step back.



# *Agent of Change*

By Timothy Tosta

On Mondays, about 4:30 p.m., I depart my office in San Francisco's financial district and head up Market Street to the top of Twin Peaks, to Laguna Honda Hospital, which serves the city's needy. There, in Ward C-2, I do hospice volunteer work, anonymously offering care and support to residents during the last hours of their lives. This powerful experience has brought new perspective to my 34-year career as a land use lawyer.

I have been a hospice volunteer for four years. Though it's always difficult to pinpoint exactly what brought me here, it likely had much to do with my own cancer diagnosis 16 years ago. While many people are afraid of being exposed to death in such a setting, I find it uplifting and invigorating. Here, I offer my greatest service.

During my five-hour shift, which begins at 5 p.m., I sometimes feed residents. Often, I listen to their stories. Occasionally, I play my ukulele and sing Tin Pan Alley tunes. And, as death approaches these people, there is nothing more to do but sit quietly. It doesn't matter that I'm a lawyer. What matters is that I am there.

Although I have seen many people die, each follows his or her own unique path. The nature of the disease, any cognitive impairment, the emotional state of the person dying, as well as his or her spiritual grounding give each death its individual signature. Yet all deaths share common elements.

Facing death takes enormous courage. Death is about confronting profound change and recognizing

that this change is inevitable. What was is gone. It can only be retrieved in memory. Now is all we have.

Based on what the dying have taught me, I see my professional work in a new way. As attorneys, we are agents of change. We plan for it, transact it, and litigate it. And, as a result of our interventions, we initiate future waves of change. When viewed from this perspective, we carry enormous responsibility. As a result, my entire approach to how I conduct my professional life has undergone a paradigm shift.

Previously, I saw my principal role as an advocate for my clients; I now see myself more as their counselor. I seek opportunities to nurture relationships among those who see themselves as combatants. I also attempt to remove my ego from the center of the engagement, knowing that a collaborative solution will last longer than any lawyer's brilliant idea. As a result, I find I have more room to bring creativity and innovation to my work. On a larger scale, because I recognize that the environment in which we find ourselves is inevitably going to change, I strive to create outcomes that can both anticipate and accommodate that change.

## ***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.

Here are a few tips I've picked up from my work with the dying. First, study how you react to change. What perceptions, attitudes, and judgments do you hold that stand in the way of accepting change over which you have little or no control? It is almost certain that in the course of every engagement, some immovable obstacle will present itself to you. The earlier you see it and choose a creative path around it - or simply accept it - the less energy you waste.

Second, set noble intentions for how you conduct yourself. Each morning when you awake, take some small aspect of that noble intention and try to fulfill it. At the end of the day see if you have even gotten close, in time, you will. Most people intuitively grasp your intentions; if you include among these honoring others, they will know it. And, you will be offered a greater opportunity to build real relationships.

Third, learn to listen deeply and patiently Begin by presuming the essential goodness of those with whom you are dealing. In other words, don't carry your baggage

into the conversation. By listening deeply, you can get out of your own way to hear the fundamental concerns of those with whom you are communicating.

Finally begin to see that the process by which you deal with others is paramount. If you can work from your essential goodness, hold noble intentions, withhold your judgments, and listen deeply and patiently you will build solid relationships. And, inevitably, those relationships will secure more timely and lasting outcomes.

I have adopted these practices as part of my professional conduct. They work. And, not surprisingly they work in my personal life too.

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**“InProPer: Agent of Change” originally published in the March 2008 issue of California Lawyer. Reprinted with permission. © 2008 Daily Journal Corporation, San Francisco, California.**



# Offerings

Rick Hanson, PhD, and Rick Mendius, MD

1. At Spirit Rock, in 2008, these daylongs with Rick Hanson and Rick Mendius are scheduled:

- 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.

- The Hard Things That Open the Mind and Heart: Practicing with Difficult Conditions, led with James Baraz, on Sunday, November 2. 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

- Resting in Emptiness: The Evolution of Awareness and the Transcendence of the Self, on Sunday, Novem-

ber 30. 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.

2. On Friday, May 2, Rick Hanson will be presenting at a Kaiser-Permanente conference about the neuropsychology of positive experiences.

3. On Saturday, May 31, in Marin County, Terry Patten will be teaching the Big Mind experience as a benefit for the Heartwood Institute for Neuroscience and Contemplative Wisdom.

4. On Sunday June 29, at New York Insight, Drs. Hanson and Mendius will be teaching their workshop: The Neurology of Awakening.

5. At the Sati Center in Redwood City, California, on Saturday, October 4, we will be presenting the Resting in Emptiness daylong.

6. 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, and wise.***