

The Wise Brain Bulletin

News and Tools for Happiness, Love, and Wisdom
Volume 2, 6 (6/18/08)

Featured Article:

A Wounded Brain

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Introduction

In a deep sense, every part or organ of the body – except one – feels like “other.” Do you identify with your big toe? Your sense of hearing? Your liver?

But how about your brain?

Disturb the toe or hearing or liver, you may feel in pain. You may even die. But all that feels like it is happening to you.

But disturb the brain . . . and that feels like it is happening as you. It is you who suddenly can’t remember things, or think clearly, or concentrate, or find pleasure in things you

used to enjoy.

Disturbances in the brain – call them wounds, perhaps – are more . . . intimate than any other maladies or dysfunctions. As a result, they are more excruciating and consequential.

In this essay, we’ll consider different brain conditions and how to cope with them.

These conditions include head injury, stroke, and dementia. As well, much of this article could be of use to people grappling with depression, anxiety, and ADHD levels of distractibility, stimulation-seeking, and impulsivity. And all of this could be helpful for caregivers of these individuals,

Also in this issue:

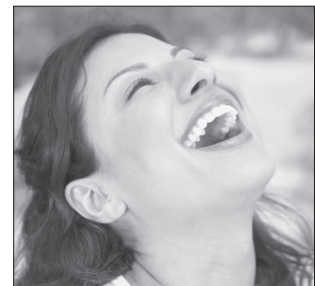
Cultivating
Positive Thinking

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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.

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 drRH@comcast.net.

including professionals, friends, and family members.

But before diving in, there's an important point: we included ADHD in our topics since it is a real issue for some people and it does originate within the brain, but we do not think of it as a wound, a disorder, a departure from the normal healthy brain.

We regard high levels of distractibility, stimulation-seeking, and impulsivity – the hallmarks of ADHD – as a normal variation in the spectrum of human temperament that actually

had a lot of adaptive benefits in hunter-gatherer cultures . . . but those characteristics are often problematic in structured school settings for children, or many workplaces. In that sense, there can indeed be a wounding, but it is wounding that originates outside the person's brain.

Because many people in the ADHD range of temperament have been pathologized – especially children in school – we wanted to be careful not to add to that pathologization ourselves.

Last, as you read this material, please be aware of how it may stir up memories or feelings – and if so, try to have compassion for yourself. To paraphrase Pema Chodren, the root of compassion for others is compassion for oneself.

The Natural State of Your Brain

When you are fed, unthreatened, pain-free, and not upset, your brain is characterized by being awake and alert, with activation of the parasympathetic nervous system, surges of pleasant hormones and neurotransmitters, receptivity to relationship, and a large-scale integration or coherence

of billions of neurons firing together in resonant harmony.

In particular, there is none of the sense of threat that is at the heart of the biology of suffering.

In short, the baseline condition of your brain is aware, even-keeled, contented, benign, and integrated.

It's remarkable that this is the resting state of an organ that's been finely honed by 650 million years of evolution of multi-celled creatures in an environment in which life typically was, as Hobbes put it, "nasty, brutish, and short."

This is your home base. It may have been disturbed by an injury or a chemical imbalance or a degenerative conditions. But at root, it is our fundamental belief that everyone can indeed go home again.

Knowing this is a great comfort, like the insight Sam had in *The Lord of the Rings*, struggling up Mount Doom, when he saw: . . . *peeping among the cloud-wrack . . . a white star twinkle for a while. The beauty of it smote his heart, as he looked up out of the forsaken land, and hope returned to him. For like a shaft, clear and cold, the thought pierced him that in the end the Shadow was only a small and passing thing: there was light and high beauty for ever beyond its reach.*

Indeed, we believe that we are all always already home, wherever we go – deep, deep down where our essential nature lives. As long as you are alive, deep down, the resting state of the brain that enables you to keep on living, is itself stably aware and peaceful.

*Be wisdom itself,
rather than a person who isn't wise
trying to become wise.*

*Trust in awareness, in being awake,
rather than in transient and unstable conditions.*

Ajahn Sumedho

Stories of Wounding and Suffering and Peace

So this magnificent three pound universe of a brain, and the mind that is manifesting through it and within it, is born and develops through childhood and into adulthood. It suffers the ordinary difficulties and pains of life, grows, and thrives. It develops skills and abilities to predict the future consequences of actions – to see that if I let go of the cup I'm dangling from my high chair, it drops! And then people get really excited!!

We develop an autobiographical self. We develop a history. We begin to know how the physical world seems to work. We begin to know how the social world seems to work. We find we have talents and strengths and problems and weaknesses. We learn we are separate from others like us, yet we can bond closely with them. We live a human life.

Everyday Suffering

That life contains unavoidable frustrations and losses, sorrows and dissatisfactions. In what are referred to as the Five Reflections in Tibetan Buddhism:

- Is it given to me to avoid disease?

- Is it given to me to avoid old age?

- Is it given to me to avoid death?

- Is it given to me to avoid being separated ultimately, one way or another, from everything I love?

- Is it given to me to avoid inheriting the results of my actions?

Out of our past, we build our expectations of the future—the world should work this way if I do this. We do this in our physical body—balancing, walking, running, dancing. We do this in our mental “body”—planning, writing, studying, thinking. We do this in our relationships—loving, fighting, joining, separating.

These abilities have helped make us such a successful species in the natural world.

But they also create a vulnerability. What if the very machinery that generates those expectations, those very efficient ways to predict the future in order to live into it, starts changing, itself? Perhaps changing suddenly, even?

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:

- 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.

- 8/12/08 – Benevolent interdependence

The enlightened self-interest of non-harming, of “giving no one cause to fear you.” Practices of compassion, loving-kindness, and sympathetic joy. Turning ill will to good will. Healthy assertiveness.

A Wound in the Brain

Let's talk through the story of someone who has developed one of the conditions we mentioned above.

For the individual with the malady (we'll try to avoid saying patient), the process starts with a nervous system that sustains an injury. This may be a genetic injury, a traumatic injury, a toxic exposure, a devastating emotional experience, a tumor, a stroke, a peripheral nerve damage, an autonomic nervous system derangement, or a degenerative condition. The onset may be subtle or dramatic, and the course gradual or rapid.

At some point, the person becomes aware, either by their own observations or by the observations of others, that something is wrong, that the world and their heart/mind/brain no longer are synchronized and effective.

This gives rise to a multitude of reactions. There may be denial, that the problem does not exist, that it belongs to someone else or that it isn't happening, clinging desperately to the past "perfection." There may be fear, that "I" will die or be in pain or be isolated and rejected. There may be anger, that this has happened to "me", that "I" don't deserve this. There may be hatred of self or other, blaming another for the events that are unfolding. There may be confusion as to how this is arising, as to what is happening to the nervous system, or even if it is happening to the nervous system.

At the base, there could be a profound sense of isolation, that "I" has now become "Other," and is no longer a full person.

These reactions cause their own cascade of nervous system events, with activation of the sympathetic (fight, flight, fright) circuits and the stress response hormonal secretions. These cause secondary damage to neural structures if they are too intense or last too long.

At some point, the person presents for diagnosis and care, putting him or herself in the hands of family, community, and healthcare professionals. This involves the relinquishing of some personal power to others, and becoming dependent in important ways, at least for awhile.

In a medical context, this is becoming a patient, putting on the gown with the open backside, and submitting to personal space invasions with diagnostic tests and treatment. On the other hand, this could be reframed as the assumption of a kind of monastic robe, the mendicant dependent on the community for his/her life, with its profound and potentially enlightening teaching of our interconnectedness and interpersonal existence.

Grace Leans

But what about the other people involved in this narrative?

As Adi Da (one of Rick Hanson's teachers) once said: "Grace leans."

The family—loved ones, parents, siblings, mates, children—also participate in the story. They have their own reactions, their own wishes, angers, and confusion. There is the history of the relationships between these people and the individual which can both bless and confound the struggle. The larger community of friends, business contacts, personal acquaintances, and others, extending out to the entire society, could also be involved in this process, providing information, shaping attitudes, helping or hindering in some way. In so many ways, the individual with wound in the brain is not alone.

The health care professionals get to write some of the



Story of a Wounding



story. They get to define the condition, describe its treatment, define success or failure. They get paid for that. All of that story is written down as well. All of that story has an effect on the individual. How to hold the professional opinions and treatments in the proper frame is a major task of the person with the condition.

So, in this story, it is so easily possible to suffer.

We suffer helplessness.

We suffer fear.

We suffer loss of initiative, agency, and personal power.

We suffer our own body's stress responses and tension.

We suffer the loss of our self image, what no longer is.

We suffer the loss of our future, and our history.

We suffer the loss of our emotional balance.

We suffer the loss of our abilities to speak, understand, and comprehend.

We suffer feelings of dependence on others.

Quite a list. Against that, we have four deep truths, that suffering exists, that there is a cause, that there is a cure, and that there is a path to treatment.

First, we need to honor the knowledge we have acquired about how frail the human brain and human condition is. We need to honor that medical knowledge and much of our understanding of what it is to be human has come from the discoveries that arose from patient's clinical histories.

Second, we need to see clearly how our greed, aversion and delusion have led to our own suffering. We need to

see clearly that there are causes of suffering that we can attend to that can be ameliorated, that we can control.

We do not have to learn to be needlessly helpless.

Third, we need to calm the bodily reactions to stress.

We need to relax in the process of giving and receiving care, since we are part of the community of mutual care.

We need to see through to the compounded nature of self—that “me, myself, and mine” are useful tools but not intrinsic permanent truths.

And fourth, we need to take a long view, to develop patience with ourselves, others, and the biologic processes occurring. We need to let go of self, accept what is, and cultivate equanimity about this life, cultivate compassion for the conditions of all who are in this life, cultivate love for those involved in this life, and cultivate joy for the process.

If you let go a little, you will have a little happiness.

If you let go a lot, you will have a lot of happiness.

If you let go completely, you will be completely happy.

Ajahn Chah

Your Own Story

As a way to move in that direction, you might like to do an exercise in self reflection. You can do it in writing or just in your own mind. And you can apply this exercise to yourself, or adapt it for another person you care for (even a child).

First, take a couple minutes or so to summarize the story of what has actually happened, not elaborating, but “just the facts.”

And, as with any exercise we offer, feel very free to ignore our suggestions or adapt them to your own situation or needs. And if anything gets upsetting for you, please pull your attention up and out of the material you have been thinking about, and shift it to things that feel supportive and peaceful for you, such as people who are loving to you, or wonderful places you have been to.

Second, take another few minutes to consider these questions:

1) What refuges have you found for coping with this wounding? Where are your personal sanctuaries and sources of wisdom and strength?

2) What or where have you been attached to that has led to suffering, particularly around whatever illness you may have? What have you clung to that has increased your suffering?

Third, title three columns. If you are working with a brain condition yourself, the columns are titled: "Who I Was" "Who I Am" "Who I Will Be." If you are focusing here on your role as a caregiver for others with brain conditions, you can title your columns: "Who We Were" "Who We Are" "Who We Will Be."

In the first column, describe who you (or you and the other person) have been in the past, before the brain condition became a factor.

In the second column, write characteristics of your present self (or the relationship), the wounding, the disabilities, and the strengths you have. The aim is to be clear, to not embellish, to not fatalize. The wounds are what they are, no more, no less.

In the third column, write characteristics of the future self you hope and intend is emerging. These are intentions, not hard and fast goals. This is the general direction in which you wish to move. The exact result is of course inherently at least a little uncertain – as persons with wounded brains know only too well.

Alright.

Some perspectives you might consider about these reflections:

- All is not well. But all was not ever completely well before, in my life or in anyone else's!
- I am struggling with deficits and inner demons. But I was struggling before, whether I saw these deficits and demons or not.
- Others are struggling with deficits and inner demons, whether I see them or not.
- The struggle is always present, but there is always this breath to attend to.
- People with obvious wounds know more fully than most others how thin the ice is for all of us.
- The truths of existence are oftentimes more clearly seen after injury than seen before.

Acceptance, Recovery, and Transcendence

Acceptance . . . recovery . . . and transcendence – these are the tasks for anyone grappling with a wounded brain.

As a physician (Rick Mendius) treating truly tens of thousands of people over the past 30 years, privileged to share parts of their journey, there are lessons and perspectives from those experiences that I would like to share with you.

First, I'd like to make a point about the process of caring for acute conditions such as a stroke or an injury to the head.

Recovery has a biologic rhythm to it. If the brain has a single injury, there is an acute response which takes some six to eight weeks to resolve. Then there is a longer recovery that goes on for years. The standard line in rehabilitation is that you get back about two thirds of

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. Newcomers are always welcome!

what you eventually recover within the first three months, and that the rest of the recovery from that injury takes up to two years.

That's the medical dogma, but the upper limit of what can be recovered or retrained has never been truly studied, and is dependent on the enthusiasm and determination of the patient and their support system. In terms of spiritual practice, being "ardent, diligent, resolute, and mindful" has a true place in rehabilitation.

Some injuries to the brain have a different time course than the single injury described above. Here recovery may have more to do with avoiding the complications of illness and maintaining functions as best as one can. Again, "ardent, diligent, resolute, and mindful" comes to the fore. Meditation practice as a way of clearly seeing what is happening now with your body and mind or with the body and mind of your loved one can be of immense use.

My second point, now, is for all brain conditions, not just acute injuries, and it is this: There is the potential for any of us, patients, caregivers, friends, anyone, to accept and transcend the disabilities and struggles of wounded brains.

Behind our wounds is radiant truth, awareness endlessly arising out of emptiness – our true selves – and if we can see that clearly, the injuries sustained by the brains of others and by our own brain can be an unparalleled opportunity for practice and insight.

Be still

Listen to the stones of the wall

Be silent, they try

To speak your

Name.

Listen to the living walls.

Who are you?

Who

Are you? Whose

Silence are you?

Thomas Merton

Tending to Causes

Ajahn Chah, the forest meditation master in whose lineage, perhaps more than any other, the Vipassana community in the West stands, used the metaphor of a fruit tree in his wonderful book, *Being Dharma*.



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

He pointed out that if you would like some apples, you could pick out a likely sapling in the nursery, prepare a good spot for in the earth, plant it carefully, water and fertilize it for a few years, protect it from harmful bugs, prune it carefully, and so on. You could do all that for sure. But you could not *make* it give you fruit.

All you could do is to tend to the causes. But you could not force the results.

The same is of course true in our own lives. All we can do is tend to the causes and let the results be whatever they are.

This attitude is both calming and reassuring – in that you can only do what you can do – and pointed in the responsibilities it does underscore: we are on the hook for the causes that are within our power, the causes that we can indeed tend to.

When we don’t know what to do about some difficulty, sometimes we think of a saying from a boy named Nkosi Johnson, from South Africa. Like many children there, Nkosi was born with HIV, and he died when he was 12. Before that happened, he became a nationally-known advocate for people with AIDS. His “mantra,” as he called it, always touches the heart: “Do all you can, with what you have, in the time you have, in the place where you are.”

That’s all anyone can ever do.

This is what the Buddha called Wise Effort, which is one of the elements of the Eightfold Path. It’s the same thing: do what you can to cause the wholesome to arise,

increase, and persist, and do what you can to cause the unwholesome to be prevented in the first place, or if it has arisen, to decrease and disappear.

As you look ahead to the rest of your life – however long or short that may be – you might consider the major causes of the wholesome that perhaps you could tend to more, or more skillfully, than you have done in the past.

The point here is not self-criticism, but an honest look at whatever is true.

Often the causes that have the greatest payoff have to do with our own well-being and functioning. If you like, take a minute to consider this question:

Are there any causes you could increasingly tend to that would significantly improve your well-being and functioning?

Sometimes those possible causes are quite limited. Maybe there is really nothing we can do about the central circumstances of our life. Maybe we are ill, in pain, depressed, running on empty, alone, and broke. It’s really like that right now for many people in the world, and probably some people reading this article right now.

But no matter how bad it ever gets, or how limited our circumstances are, we can always tend to some causes within our own minds.

For example, we can always be simply mindful of what is arising in awareness. That alone often brings some peace and wisdom. If nothing else, being mindful today tends to the wholesome cause of being more capable of mindfulness in the future.

Taking Refuge

Another sort of cause of the good which we can always tend in our own mind is the taking of refuge.

It is interesting that the theme of refuge is found in developmental psychology in the “secure base” of

nurturing caregivers, in Clausewitz's first rule of warfare – “secure a base of operations” – and in every wisdom tradition we know of.

Resting in refuge tends wholesome causes by giving us respite, sanctuary, solace, and support. In its essence, refuge can be where we come from, the starting point in daily living.

For example, in Buddhism, you can always find refuge in what are called “the Three Jewels”: Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha.

Buddha can be taken to mean the historical Siddhartha – a great practitioner and teacher – or perhaps the deep capacity for wakefulness and freedom within each of us.

Dharma means both the way it is, the deep truth of things, and the statements of the truth that offer good guidance. Such as the understanding that everything is related to everything else and is constantly changing, which means that clinging and clutching to things in life inevitably leads to suffering.

Sangha means community, both in its vertical dimension of teachers or leaders or guides who have traveled further along the path, and in its horizontal dimension of fellow travelers, good company, fellow practitioners, fellow sufferers, those hunkered down together with us in the same foxhole.

You do not need to think of yourself as Buddhist to find useful meaning in these refuges: the possibility of wisdom and goodness within each of us, the truth and the teachings of truth, and friends and allies and comrades in the journey of life.

So if you like, let's take a minute, each in our own way, to take refuge in the wakefulness and goodness inside . . . the truth and the knowing of truth . . . and in community . . .

Of course, there are also other possible refuges that can be places of relief or renewal for you.

For example, some might take refuge in God, by whatever name. Or refuge in the good experiences they know they have already had in this life, or the good things they know they have done. Or refuge in feeling loved by their family and friends. Or refuge in practice, in right effort, in simply doing what they can with what they've been given in the place where they are with the time that they have. Or refuge in insight, in seeing the truth of things so deeply that it is freeing.

*Penetrative insight
joined with calm abiding
utterly eradicates
afflicted states.*

Shantideva



What do you take refuge in? What have been reliable refuges for you?

The Long Road of the Rest of Your Life

Of course, it sounds so simple, to drop the old self and the attachment to how things were, and to pick up this new, more enlightened self, seen clearly as a tool and servant of your true nature.

We get glimpses of what that can be like, but how does this work when we try to apply these lessons to our daily lives – no matter what state our brain is in?

First, take it easy – which often means, take it slowly. That previous self was forged over years and decades. Those habits of thought and action were reinforced by family, friends, teachers, and society. Take a timeline of years to decades to work out the new patterns of thought and action. This way, if you aren't successful on Tuesday, it's not such a problem. We don't expect a toddler to read the instruction manual for the VCR and program it.

Second, stay clear on what is, what you can and cannot do, and hopeful about what you can do in the future. Seeing clearly and understanding clearly what the brain you are living inside is capable of doing will help immensely in relieving your suffering.

At a mundane level, there is no way that either of us, guys in our 50's, will ever play professional basketball. We can, however, walk, bicycle, work out, hike, kayak, and rock climb ("best off the couch I've ever seen," said the well-honed guide). There are parallels, undoubtedly, in your own situation. Far better

to release the unattainable and to minimize the suffering of useless effort, so you can focus on what is attainable and perhaps experience the surprising grace of surpassing yourself and your preconceptions.

So if you like, every so often, do a review of what your current abilities are and where you want to go. Perhaps

Grateful Wonder

About a hundred years ago, the first human being stood atop the north pole of our lonely precious planet.

Today, a robot scientific lander named Phoenix is sitting on the north pole of Mars, taking pictures and digging into the ground for evidence of water and life.

Remember that Columbus landed in the Caribbean islands in 1492 . . . and over a hundred years later the first colony in North America was established in Jamestown in 1620 (which perished within a dozen years). The first person walked on the moon in 1969. Using the time frame of the Age of Exploration, it could be a hundred years or more before the first viable colony on Mars – but so be it! Time is long and memory is short. Will it be a thousand years or ten thousand before people walk on Pluto? In a time frame in which people like you and me walked around California and Massachusetts ten thousand years ago shooting arrows and having babies and lighting fires and telling stories . . . does nine thousand years matter that much?!

Here are a few pictures from – and of – the planet that is the most likely next stop on the long slow human migration out into our solar system.

- Our neighbor:
<http://quest.nasa.gov/mars/photos/images/mars3-97.gif>
- Phoenix landing on Mars:
<http://antwrp.gsfc.nasa.gov/apod/ap080527.html>
- Welcome to the north pole of Mars:
<http://antwrp.gsfc.nasa.gov/apod/ap080526.html>
- A chunk of likely ice – water! – under the Phoenix:
<http://antwrp.gsfc.nasa.gov/apod/ap080612.html>
- The Phoenix starts analyzing soil on Mars:
<http://antwrp.gsfc.nasa.gov/apod/astropix.html>
- Sunset on Mars:
http://www.nasa.gov/images/content/117989main_image_feature_347_ys_full.jpg

make up one month plans, one year plans, five year plans for yourself. Make those plans humanly possible so as to not set yourself up for suffering.

It may be true that the illness and wounding of your brain is not one that allows recovery. That too, needs to be brought into the light of truth. For example, in Buddhism, the story is that the young Siddhartha – who would one day become the One Who Knows, otherwise called the Buddha – began his journey of discovery in this life through encountering the four “divine messengers” of Disease, Old Age, Death . . . and the Spiritual Practitioner. They all bore the same message: life as an animal body is not perfectible, but it’s not all bad, and in fact can be extraordinarily blissful loving joyful peaceful benevolent and wise.

In fact, in some cases, the wounding of a person’s brain may be an ultimately terminal condition. Death, too, is a Divine Messenger. It is an unavoidable condition of our existence, and all of our reactions to it can be brought into awareness, understanding, and acceptance. There are books and entire programs of practice around Death and the fear of death, so we won’t devote time here to working with that immense subject. One small point here is that setting out Right Intentions for the dying process will help in smoothing the way. We can say goodbye consciously, with awareness and integrity and love.

Third, use forgiveness and gentle humor to help yourself along the way. When a toddler attempts to walk, loses his balance, and plops down on his diaper, we say how cute they are and smile. We are creating a new self here, and need to hold our mistakes with the same parental affection that we hold our young children’s efforts.

This is also true for the more difficult emotions, such as anger or fear or paranoia, or the more difficult physical actions and verbal outbursts that may arise. These need to be held in the mode of compassion and equanimity. If we can hold ourselves and our loved ones in that spacious caring place, the turmoil and further trauma that often arises can be avoided or even transformed.

Finally, cultivate love and joy along the path. This is still a human life, with amazing potential. Seeking out the joyful and the positive has both protective and growth producing qualities. It helps us down the Road and makes any burdens we carry lighter.

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

Suzuki Roshi



Stopping the Worry, Reversing Negative Thinking, and Creating Space for Peace and Joy in Your Life.

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The old grey donkey, Eeyore stood by himself in a thistly corner of the Forest, his front feet well apart, his head on one side, and thought about things. Sometimes he thought sadly to himself, 'Why?' and sometimes he thought, 'Wherefore?' and sometimes he thought, 'Inasmuch as which?' and sometimes he didn't quite know what he was thinking about.

A. A. Milne, in Winnie the Pooh

Now that all of your worry has proved to be such an unproductive business, why not find a better job?

Hafiz, Sufi Poet

I come from a family of worriers. Growing up and all the way through my thirties, I thought that worry was a normal part of life. I worried about my grades in school, what people thought of me, would I make friends, get a decent job, get married, have a healthy baby, work hard enough, impress my boss? The list goes on. I just assumed that both worry and constant striving for perfect accomplishment are those things that all humans need to do to survive. I also grew up feeling like everyone always knew what I was thinking, and worried constantly that I was being judged.

It has been a slow, but powerful revelation for me that 1) I actually don't need to worry and 2) I am not my thoughts, and 3) I don't need to be perfect, I just need to be me. What a huge relief! Thoughts come and thoughts go, some good, some bad, most are repetitive, but they are not me. I have come to realize that there is no upside to worry and it doesn't serve any purpose except to create more worry.

I have learned that there is much more to my essence than

my thoughts. They are only a small part of who I am. The other huge revelation is that I don't have to keep thinking the same thought over and over again. I can think it once, or twice or three times even, then let it go. When I do that, it loses its power over me. I can be the awareness behind the thought and notice the thoughts without getting caught up in them. What is even better is that I have learned that I can actually change my thoughts, and you can too.

If you can be present to notice that thoughts are just thoughts and not real, you become empowered to choose whether to react to them or not and whether to keep thinking them or not. You can learn to think different, more positive and creative thoughts. Amazingly, this does not come from actively thinking or trying to think. A practical way for me to do this is to think of my brain as a radio. If I am obsessing over a negative thought about an in my worrying mode, I think about changing the channel to another station. I actually pretend there is a knob in my head by my ear and I click over to another channel. This really works for me. The new station can be one where I imagine pleasant music, where I shift from thinking to actually looking around and seeing and experiencing the beauty and magic around me, or just letting myself rest in stillness. For me, creativity and insight arise from the stillness and awareness that comes from this quiet place.

There was a time in my life, less than six months ago (okay, 3 months ago), when I was so caught up in depression and negative thinking patterns that I could barely function. I even said to my husband one morning: "I don't want to get out of bed, I would rather stay in bed all day and think negative thoughts." Sounds crazy, and it is,

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.

but it shows the power that negative thoughts can have on people. When you get stuck in a negative thinking pattern, you forget that you have a choice. Negative thinking is a self-fulfilling prophecy. Negative thoughts have a way of gaining momentum and building upon each other and taking over your life. Once you are caught up in the spiral of negative thinking, it can be very difficult to climb back out.

But the good news is that this can be reversed and I am living proof that this can happen. Taking action, making the shift from thinking of yourself as a victim of negative thinking to being proactive and developing healthful habits and rituals lays the foundation for optimism, a more positive outlook and feeling like you can affect change for the better. It has been shown scientifically that neurons that wire together fire together. Once the shift happens away from negative thoughts to more positive thoughts, a momentum builds that can reverse your path from the downward spiral to a more joyful and fulfilling life.

Treatment of depression often focuses on relieving acute suffering without taking the long view and providing tools and a foundation for creating a more positive healthful outlook that can help to protect against future episodes. To me, this is like to providing antibiotics for an infection without teaching healthful ways of strengthening the immune system, washing hands before cooking, exercise, healthy diet, etc.

Here are some tools and suggestions that I have learned along my journey that have helped me to make the shift away from negative thinking to a more joyful and positive sense of self. I hope they will help you too.

1) Develop a meditation practice. Even if it is just for 15 minutes per day, sit and just notice your thoughts. You don't need to try to stop them. Just notice that they are there. When you notice them, you are not identified with them and they become more fluid and can come and go. Anyone can meditate and there is no such thing as being a good or bad meditator. If you can breathe and notice what you are thinking, you can meditate. You don't need to stop your thoughts, just sit in quiet awareness and notice them. When you do this, you realize that you are not your thoughts, they just happen and you are watching them. It is from this quiet space that intuition and creativity arise. These things cannot come through by trying to think about them. They come in the spaces between the thoughts.

2) Learn to breathe. This is one of life's most basic functions, yet it is easy to forget how to do it. Learn how to take full deep breaths into your belly. Let your belly expand and welcome the breath. This was difficult for me. I was always trying to keep my belly in, so letting it expand was a new concept for me.

3) Exercise. This is good for the body and brain and stimulates release of hormones that make you feel good. Why not? Find something you like to do and get out and do it 20-30 minutes a day.

4) Connect. Find ways to connect with people in more than superficial ways. Get involved with your community, cultivate friendships, reach out and really "be" with people, help them and support them. This will help you to realize that we are all at some level struggling with worry, judgment of ourselves and others and trying to prove ourselves and our worth. By

From Our Contributors

Reality

The way it is
In this moment

Is the
Natural result

Of the choices
Everyone made

Now we get
To choose

The way
It will be

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connecting and sharing, a shift starts to happen where we support each other in this journey to find a more healthful balance between doing and being.

5) Get out in nature. Notice the trees and the flowers and wildlife. Just watch and take it all in without naming it or thinking about it too much. When I do this, colors become brighter and everything seems more alive.

6) Notice and observe negative thinking patterns in others. Don't judge or try to change them, but by observing and becoming more aware of them, you can see how the thinking process can spiral. One negative thought can lead to another and another and then becomes a full cascade of thinking that is hard to stop and gain perspective again. You may be able to help someone who is going down this path by letting them know what you love and appreciate about them.

7) If there is something you always wanted to do, but have been afraid to do it, take the risk, go for it. If you don't at least try, you may have regrets later. If you try and it doesn't work out, you will definitely have learned something that will help the next time you want to take a risk and try something new.

8) Find something you like to do that is creative and stretches your brain in a new and different way from your normal activities. It may take some trial and error before you find what this is for you. It may be music, art, collecting coins, or making paper airplanes. For me, it is collecting shells and sea glass and making jewelry to give to my friends and family.

None of this stuff is new, we just need to be reminded again and again. Twenty-five hundred years ago Buddha described the Noble Eightfold path. The first step on the path is Wise (right) view, to understand suffering, to understand the end of suffering and to learn the path out of suffering. Changing our thoughts is the first step in this journey.

* * *

Laura Francis is a marine biologist and marine educator and mom who has suffered and recovered from depression. She shares her story at www.outofthewell.com in an effort to cultivate more compassion, kindness and awareness of depression and provide resources for people who are working to find their way out of the well of depression and into wellness.



Words of Wisdom:

The Wound That Breaks Open the Heart

Be not afraid of life. Believe that life is worth living and your belief will help create the fact.

William James

Success is moving from one failure to another without loss of enthusiasm.

Winston Churchill

Action absorbs anxiety.

Angie Arrien

Whether we study physical or mental phenomena, the mind or its psychological factors, it's only when we make liberation from suffering our ultimate goal that we're on the right path.

Suffering has a cause, a condition for its existence.

Ajahn Chah

Between stimulus and response, one has the freedom to choose.

Stephen Covey

The ability to simplify means to eliminate the unnecessary so that the necessary may speak.

Hans Hofmann

*Winter is on my head,
but eternal spring is in my heart.*

Victor Hugo

Have patience with everything unresolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves. Don't search for the answers which could not be given to you now because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything.

Live the questions now. Perhaps then you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answers.

Rainer Maria Rilke

There are only two ways to live your life.

One is as though nothing is a miracle.

The other is as though everything is a miracle.

Albert Einstein

If you have wondered – What could possibly be fueling the unease that I so routinely experience in my daily life? – you might want to take to heart the Buddha's suggestion: It is the fact that you demand too much from the world. You ask that the world's objects yield abiding pleasure, satisfaction, and security. But how can they? The world's pretty things are ephemeral, transparent and unreliable, aren't they?

Andrew Olendzki

The sustained awareness of the arising and passing of each moment, the realization of the ceaseless flow of impermanence, develops a clear, sparkling illumination of consciousness that dispels clinging and brings enlightenment.

U Ba Khin

I have been more motivated by trying to figure out how to live when you know you are going to die. Knowing that you're going to die makes how you live a very important question. So my motivation was to find the best way to live given the limited time I have.

Blanche Hartman

When it's over, I want to say: all my life

I was a bride married to amazement.

I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.

When it's over, I don't want to wonder

If I have made of my life something particular, and real.

I don't want to find myself sighing and frightened,

Or full of argument.

I don't want to end up simply having visited this world.

Mary Oliver

Enchantment is the oldest form of medicine.

C.G. Jung

Affirmations and Self-Esteem

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Introduction

Many people believe if you hear messages repeated over a period of time, these messages can affect the way you feel about yourself and then, in time, the way you act. These messages are often accompanied by emotions; this makes the messages very strong, that is, they can really affect your “self-image,” or how you feel about yourself!

For instance, if your parent or a friend or someone else in your life keeps speaking about what they think is a “bad” (negative) part of you, you will probably be impacted by it- and you may even think less of yourself because of it- even if it isn’t true!

However, if you hear “good” (positive) things from those same people, you will probably feel good about yourself. While it’s true that other people’s messages do affect you, it is also true that any message you “send” to yourself can also influence how you feel about yourself!

When you say positive things about yourself, they are called, “AFFIRMATIONS,” because they affirm or say,

“yes” about how you think of yourself.

When you repeat these affirmations, over a period of time, your SELF-ESTEEM (how you feel about yourself) will grow and improve!

You will feel better- not only about yourself- but also about everything!

It’s a wonderful gift to give to yourself! Other people will also notice

the change in your personality. How long does this take? That varies from person to person, but you will definitely notice a change within two months- perhaps within one month!

Some Ways to Use Affirmations

1) Write your affirmations (at least three or four) on an index card in large print. (You may want to use pieces of cardboard or something that will last a while.)

2) Keep them in a special place in your room- a mirror is a good place because you can look at your face as you say them.

3) Say them EVERY DAY aloud! 10 to 25 times each, and look in the mirror when you say them.

4) Keep a large photo of yourself near the affirmations. Look at the photo, or in the mirror (or both) as you say them.

5) There are many good opportunities to say affirmations when you are not at home- Some examples are:

- When you are doing any repetitive physical exercise,
- When you are driving or walking
- When you are a passenger
- When you’re waiting in (or on) line

Religion/Spirituality

This is a practice that has no direct relationship to religion, but it is definitely spiritual! You are looking within - at yourself and your feelings! At first (like most

From Our Contributors

Heaven and Hell

Maybe
Heaven and Hell

Are the
Same place

Depending
On

The day
You are having

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new things), it may feel “strange” or different. IT IS! You have decided to give yourself this new gift; you have committed to a new practice to help your “self-image!” After you notice the positive affect it has on life, you will look forward to this ritual; it will become part of your daily routine; it will become part of your life. You will change!

Some Suggested Affirmations

- 1) I’m a good person - I deserve to be happy!
- 2) I approve of myself just the way I am!
- 3) I am powerful and I am loving; I am powerful and I am loved; I am powerful and I love being powerful!! (powerful is a very empowering word)

4) I can handle anything!

5) I am beautiful (good)!

6) I have love in my heart; I have love in my soul, I have love in my mind, I have love in my body – and this makes me a powerful, beautiful person – Yes It Does! – I’m a powerful and beautiful person – Yes I Am!

* * *

For 25 years, Bruce Silver taught socially and emotionally maladjusted students at Bellevue Hospital and other major institutions. These days, he writes poetry, drives a mobile art project, pumps iron, and keeps loving his wonderful wife, Barbara.

Book Review

My Stroke of Insight: A Brain Scientist’s Personal Journey Jill Bolte Taylor, Ph.D. (Viking, 2008)

Reviewed by Cheryl Wilfong, © 2008

There’s an e-mail going around with a link to an 18-minute video of a brain scientist talking about having a stroke at age 37. A few minutes into the video, Dr. Jill Taylor brings out a real human brain, the audience groans, and she shows us the structure of the brain—the left hemisphere, the right hemisphere. The two hemispheres are connected by the corpus callosum which she calls the “highway for information transfer.”

This video on www.ted.com (Technology, Entertainment and Design—TED) is memorable, not only for the content, but also for the presentation. When Dr. Jill talks about the nirvana of surrendering her life in an ambulance, she is so moved by the memory that her intensity

transmits directly to us, the viewers. I give this video a 5-star rating; it’s the best video I’ve seen in a long time.

Jill Taylor’s uncommon, but not rare, stroke happened when a congenitally malformed blood vessel burst in her left brain, bathing the left brain in blood and shutting down its cognitive functioning. She was then operating from her right brain only, which she calls a parallel processor as opposed to the left brain’s serial processor. The left brain functions of distinguishing, categorizing and recognition shut down, leaving her with the bare experience of sense contact. Phone numbers became squiggles on paper; voices emitted unrecognizable sounds; light burned her eyes. The sense of a separate body dissolved

into a feeling of fluidity and being one with the Universe. Dr. Jill describes a bliss of oneness that sounds like the sixth jhana of Infinite Consciousness.

In her book *My Stroke of Insight*, Dr. Taylor goes into much more detail than she does in her 18-minute talk. Being a brain scientist, she begins with two chapters on the structure of the brain. The next five chapters deal with the morning of the stroke, how she watched her brain shut down and how she managed just enough cognitive functioning to make two phone calls and thereby save herself. The next six chapters focus on her eight-year recovery of full functioning. Not until year four did she regain fluidity of movement and the ability to multi-task. Also in year four, her brain chatter came back on line. (Imagine having a four-year vacation from the ego!) During year eight, her perception of being fluid shifted back to being a solid, separate body.

The final six chapters tell us how, having had this experience of inner peace and the consciousness that is available to all of us in our right brains, she now has to choose what we meditators would call skillful thinking, moment by moment.



Dr. Taylor has an idiosyncratic writing style, but I was so intrigued by the content that I found the book to be a page-turner. Unknowingly, Jill Bolte Taylor has written a book that describes her personal experience of what Buddhists call the Five Aggregates (Pali: khandhas; Sanskrit: skandhas): body, feelings, perception, mental formations (or the lack of them), consciousness.

In particular, her recounting of the lack of concepts, the lack of cognizing and therefore the lack of re-cognizing slows down the process of perception for the rest of us who have the process of perception on automatic pilot. For instance, her vision became pixilated, so that she could not recognize the symbols which we know as numbers and letters. She offers a fascinating glimpse into the possible. Her experience is an inspiration, and, even though she knows nothing about the Dharma, gives me faith.

Jill Taylor wrote her book to relieve the suffering of the relatives of stroke victims, but she offers hope to even the casual reader. “My stroke of insight would be: Peace is only a thought away, and all we have to do to access it is silence the voice of our dominating left mind.”

To view Dr. Jill Bolte Taylor’s talk, go to <http://www.ted.com/talks/view/id/229>. For more information about her book, visit www.drjilltaylor.com.

* * *

Cheryl Wilfong is a Community Dharma Leader in Brattleboro, Vermont. She teaches meditation and gives Dharma talks at the Vermont Insight Meditation Center. (www.vermontinsight.org) She is working on a manuscript about meditation and gardening.

Offerings

Rick Hanson, PhD, and Rick Mendius, MD

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

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

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

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, and wise.