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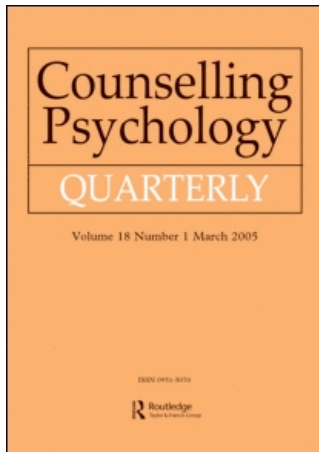
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## INTERVIEW

# **Skillful means at the intersection of neuropsychology and the contemplative disciplines: Patrizia Collard interviews Rick Hanson and Richard Mendius**

PATRIZIA COLLARD

*School of Psychology, University of East London, UK*

Rick Hanson, PhD



Richard Mendius, MD



*Patrizia: Can you each tell us something about your background and current interests?*

*Rick:* I'm a clinical psychologist in private practice in the San Francisco Bay Area, and an author and workshop leader. I've also studied many contemplative traditions, and began meditating in 1974. My wife and I are raising two teenagers, which will get you interested in psychological tools if anything will!

*Richard:* I'm a board-certified neurologist, also living near San Francisco, with a lot of training in EEGs and other brain-oriented technologies. My wife died after a long struggle with cancer, and I am now raising a teenager and two preschoolers. I too have been meditating for many years, and Rick and I both have a spiritual home with Spirit Rock Meditation Center in California.

Together, we have been presenting many workshops on what we call "applied neurodharma", as well as creating a non-profit institute and a related website

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(www.WiseBrain.org). Further, with Rick as the main writer, we produce a bi-monthly newsletter called the *Wise Brain Bulletin*, teach a monthly course called Train Your Brain that is available on-line (at www.StarfishPartners.com), and we are writing a book with an esteemed Buddhist teacher in England, Christina Feldman.

Patrizia: *Why are you pursuing these activities?*

*Rick:* It's to develop, collect, organize, and offer practical tools anyone can use for happiness, love, effectiveness, and wisdom. That's what we're about: useful methods for regular people in the middle of busy lives. As much as possible, they're offered at no charge or by donation only via the internet and other vehicles.

Think of three circles: psychology, neurology, and contemplative practice. Within each circle there is great information and wonderful tools. Where any pair intersect, there is lots of cross-fertilization and refinement of methods and tools. And the intersection of all three is the core, the heartwood you could say, of personal well-being, lovingly skillful relating to others, and spiritual development.

In particular, the growing dialogue between neuropsychology and the meditative disciplines is historically unprecedented. The exploration of common ground between a mainly Western science of mind and brain, and a mainly Eastern pursuit of the Awakened heart, is leading to more effective, more diverse, and better understood methods for using the mind to change the brain to benefit the whole being.

Those perspectives and tools are useful at any point on the psychospiritual spectrum: to address different psychopathologies, to relieve everyday stress and distress, to promote human potential and self-actualization, and to help individuals progress on their own religious or spiritual path, whatever that is.

Patrizia: *What led you to get interested in the field of neuropsychology and in how the brain is affected by meditation?*

*Richard:* Well, you can't work daily with people's brains without seeing an intimate connection between changes in brain tissue and changes in mood, personality, cognition, motivation, etc. And it goes both ways: you also see the palpable links between changes in mental states and changes in the physical organ that is the brain.

While the mechanisms linking psyche and soma, mind and brain, subjective and objective, are about as well understood in science today as the structure of the atom was understood by the early alchemists during the Middle Ages – which is to say, not well at all! – the recent advent of technologies like functional MRIs give us an incredible window into the nervous system that should bring significantly greater clarity to this thorny subject even during our lifetimes.

*Rick:* The most complex object known to science is the brain. More complex than a supernova or global climate change. The first microscopes were invented in the

early 1600s, which opened up a whole new world of microbiology. Imagine the understanding of biology around 1750: that's probably about where we are today with the science of neuropsychology. Imagine where we'll be in 100 years! The pace of scientific progress on the brain is really exciting. If the 20th century could be called the century of the atom – consider quantum physics and molecular biology – this one could be the century of the brain.

One of the most penetrating ways to study the brain is to examine people with highly developed minds. As Richard said, when your mind changes, your brain changes; when your brain changes, your mind changes. For example, taxi cab drivers in London have thicker neuronal layers in the regions of their hippocampus that code for spatial memory, and pianists have thicker layers in the regions controlling fine motor movements of the fingers. Similarly, long-time meditators have thicker layers in two areas of the brain: one in the parietal lobes that deals with sensing the internal state of the body, and one in the cingulate gyrus, which is involved with paying attention.

Therefore, by studying advanced practitioners of established meditative disciplines, some of whom have over 10,000 hours of training, you can learn a lot about how far the mind can go in influencing the brain. That starts to bring an empirical, scientific understanding to the upper reaches of human potential. As a guy who grew up in the 1960s and 1970s with the human potential movement, and both appreciated its great parts but was turned off to the sometimes starry-eyed exaggerated claims about it, it's great to have more hard *evidence* for what's really possible in terms of awareness, presence, bliss, and beyond.

Further, since the study of consciousness is closely tied to the study of awareness, which in turn is closely tied to the study of attention, by examining people who have refined their attention to an exquisite degree, you can work backwards to a more penetrating analysis of consciousness.

We're far from the first to recognize these opportunities. EEG studies of meditation go back to the 1970s, and recently people like Richard Davidson, Alan Wallace, Jonathan Cohen, and Barbara Frederickson have been doing great work on contemplative neuroscience and related studies in attention and positive emotions. Jon Kabat-Zinn has made an extraordinary contribution worldwide with his development and scientific verification of mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR). You probably know about the Mind and Life Institute, linking major figures like the Dalai Lama and senior scholars, and co-sponsoring major conferences with institutions such as MIT. And that's just the tip of the iceberg; out of the spotlight, truly thousands of researchers and clinicians around the world are working in the incredibly fertile common ground of psychology, neurology, and contemplative practice.

Patrizia: *What's the niche of your own work?*

Richard: For starters, I should make it clear that a whole group of people have come together in this neurodharma territory. We have professors from the University of California working with us, as well as senior Buddhist teachers,

scholars in contemplative Christianity, biochemists who pioneered the understanding of the links between stress and the oxidative processes leading to cancer, skilled practitioners in neurofeedback, and many more generous and remarkable individuals.

That said, Rick and I emphasize *integration* and *application*. First, we really try to connect the dots emerging within psychology and neurology and contemplative disciplines – especially the discipline of Buddhism, the one we are most familiar with, and arguably the one with the most highly developed and transferable map of the mind and thus brain (particularly the Theravadan branch, which is organized around the earliest record of the Buddha’s teachings, in the Pali Canon).

For example, we have elaborated the links between the dopamine-based gating that determines whether attention is stably focused on an object or updated with new information...and the intensely positive emotions (tapping dopamine systems) of rapture that help keep that gate closed and thus aid meditative absorption. Or the links among the psychological studies of trauma-based reactivity, the growing neurological understanding of the amygdala system that labels experience as pleasant (“approach”) or unpleasant (“avoid”), and the Buddhist analysis of equanimity as the impartial and non-clinging response to what’s called the Second Aggregate of “feeling” (i.e., the sense of experience as pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral).

*Rick:* Just in these two examples, I think you can see the possibilities. We don’t want, *a priori*, to privilege psychology, neurology, or contemplative practice, nor privilege any branch or school within these three domains. We want to draw upon, sift through, and offer what’s great in them all! We think they are all fingers pointing at the same underlying truth, which is mostly, if not entirely (though Richard and I both think there is a mysterious Transcendental something involved in the mix somehow), rooted in the physical and informational processes of the human nervous system.

We love the power of pluralism and empiricism. Let’s respect the multiple traditions, and not try to blur them together, but at the same time, let’s use them skillfully to converge on the fundamental underlying truth that is always already the case, and stands independent of any seemingly diverging descriptions of it.

*Richard:* Yes. And second, regarding applications, we are passionate about skillful means, the democratization of access to them, and the systematic individualization of psychological healing and growth, and progress in spiritual realization.

We see the internet as an incredible opportunity for giving people worldwide instant and *free* access to an integrated and comprehensive toolbox that they can pick and choose from, depending on their own tastes and needs and psychological or spiritual orientations. That’s what we are trying to provide in our website, writings, and courses.

*Patrizia:* *Do you think everyone should meditate?*

*Rick:* Not exactly. Meditation is one among many powerful skillful means. In some ways, it is to the brain what aerobic exercise is to the heart. There's tremendous evidence for the benefits of meditation.

*Richard:* For example, a common finding in studies of people who meditate regularly is that their sympathetic nervous system does not react as intensely to stress, and it returns to baseline more quickly. Therefore, meditation helps reduce the pathological effects of chronic stress-related activation of the sympathetic system. In more everyday terms, it also helps people feel calmer, more peaceful, and happier.

*Rick:* But on the other hand, people really vary in their temperament. I work with a lot of children with more spirited temperaments, and know many adults as well who are innately more like jackrabbits than turtles – but most meditation teachers, including ourselves, are pretty turtle-like. So what do you do if you're just not built that way? You may have to try other methods if you want to steady the mind, like walking meditation, or art or playing music or singing or cooking, etc. The point is that there is always *something* a person can do, right where they are today, to feel better or be more functional, and it's not always meditation.

*Patrizia:* *Are you doing research?*

*Richard:* Yes. It looks like we'll be doing several related projects within the framework of what we call "guerilla research": studies that are solid and publishable and ethical, but also low-budget, collaborative, inventive, and low overhead.

Right now we're looking at (a) a longitudinal study of the long-term effects of meditation, especially on an aging population (since there are promising signs that meditation can slow the cognitive declines associated with aging), maybe in part through large-scale website-based surveys, (b) the neurological correlates of equanimity and how to train people in them, and (c) how to help people with a "wounded brain" (e.g., head injury, chronic depression, stroke, early dementia, intense ADHD) use contemplative perspectives and practices to improve their well-being.

*Rick:* Also, on the WiseBrain website, we are putting up a major section that is a clearinghouse for research at the intersection of psychology, neurology, and contemplative practice. It is being managed by Michael Hagerty, PhD, an academic who has researched quality of life worldwide, and collaborated with scholars like Martin Seligman on studies of happiness. This section of the site will have links to major annotated bibliographies of research on consciousness, the mind-brain connection, the neuropsychology of positive psychology and contemplative practice, and credible self-help methods for increasing happiness, love, effectiveness, and wisdom. It will also post articles, link to the work of major researchers and institutions, and invite commentaries on the state of the field and what its future directions might include.

*Patrizia:* *Can your work be applied outside a Buddhist frame-work of thinking?*

*Rick:* That's been very important to us. In fact, *most* of what we do is applied outside the Buddhist frame.

It's part of the not-privileging any particular view or tradition, including Western science, but rather respecting and being open to the great diversity of contribution streams in the world. And then applying them to the immediate daily life issues of anybody who's interested, and especially for the vast majority of people who will never see a counselor or meditate.

The point is to be helpful in practical and accessible terms that are not esoteric, "weird", high-brow, or off-putting. I think about my wonderful relatives in North Dakota, in the American Midwest, and keep trying to think what would be useful and clear to them.

With regard to those people who are interested in some form of spiritual practice, we draw upon the insights about the mind and thus the brain that come from *all* the wisdom traditions. And we try to feedback to those traditions information and possible refinements in methods of practice that come from psychoneurology and other contemplative traditions that are hopefully clarifying and useful.

For Richard and me personally, we feel very grateful to live in a time in which we can rest in a "home base" in Buddhism (especially the vipassana stream) while learning from other schools of thought and practice as well, whether it's psychoanalysis, cognitive therapy, biofeedback, or Christian contemplative ideas about personal transformation.

*Richard:* For example, on our website, we are adding "pages" for each of the six major world contemplative traditions – Buddhist, Hindu, Christian, Muslim, Jewish, and Shamanic (each one of which obviously encompasses many different lineages) – and each of these will have articles, links to major related websites in that tradition, news, and personal commentaries. And we invite your readers to look into them and see if they want to contribute!

Also, our institute will be co-sponsoring an annual interfaith conference, focused on neuropsychology and contemplative practice, tentatively titled: "This Is Your Brain on God". We'll be doing two "dress rehearsals" for it during the next year or so, with the first large conference scheduled for the Fall of 2008. Andrew Dreitcer, PhD, a professor at Claremont College in California, is the primary organizer of it. The overarching aim is to use neuropsychology to clarify what is happening during different contemplative practices, and thus illuminate similarities and differences – all with a clear understanding that anything Transcendental by definition transcends the material processes of the brain.

*Patrizia:* *How can people find out more? Are you interested in more collaborators?*

*Rick:* We'd love more collaborators! That's a lot of what's great about working in that "heartwood" intersection of psychology, neurology, and contemplative practice: so many wonderful people are already engaged there, and others are getting involved and making their own contributions, too. We are happy to

publish solid writing on our website and in the *Wise Brain Bulletin*, we invite feedback to our own writings, we are looking for sponsors and appropriate co-presenters for lectures and workshops in Europe and throughout the world, and we are interested in research collaborations, too.

*Richard:* People can see most of our writings and download our talks from the Wise Brain website. They could also sign up for the monthly Train Your Brain course through Starfish. And they can email us directly at [drh@comcast.net](mailto:drh@comcast.net) for Rick and for myself at [drichardmendius@aol.com](mailto:drichardmendius@aol.com).